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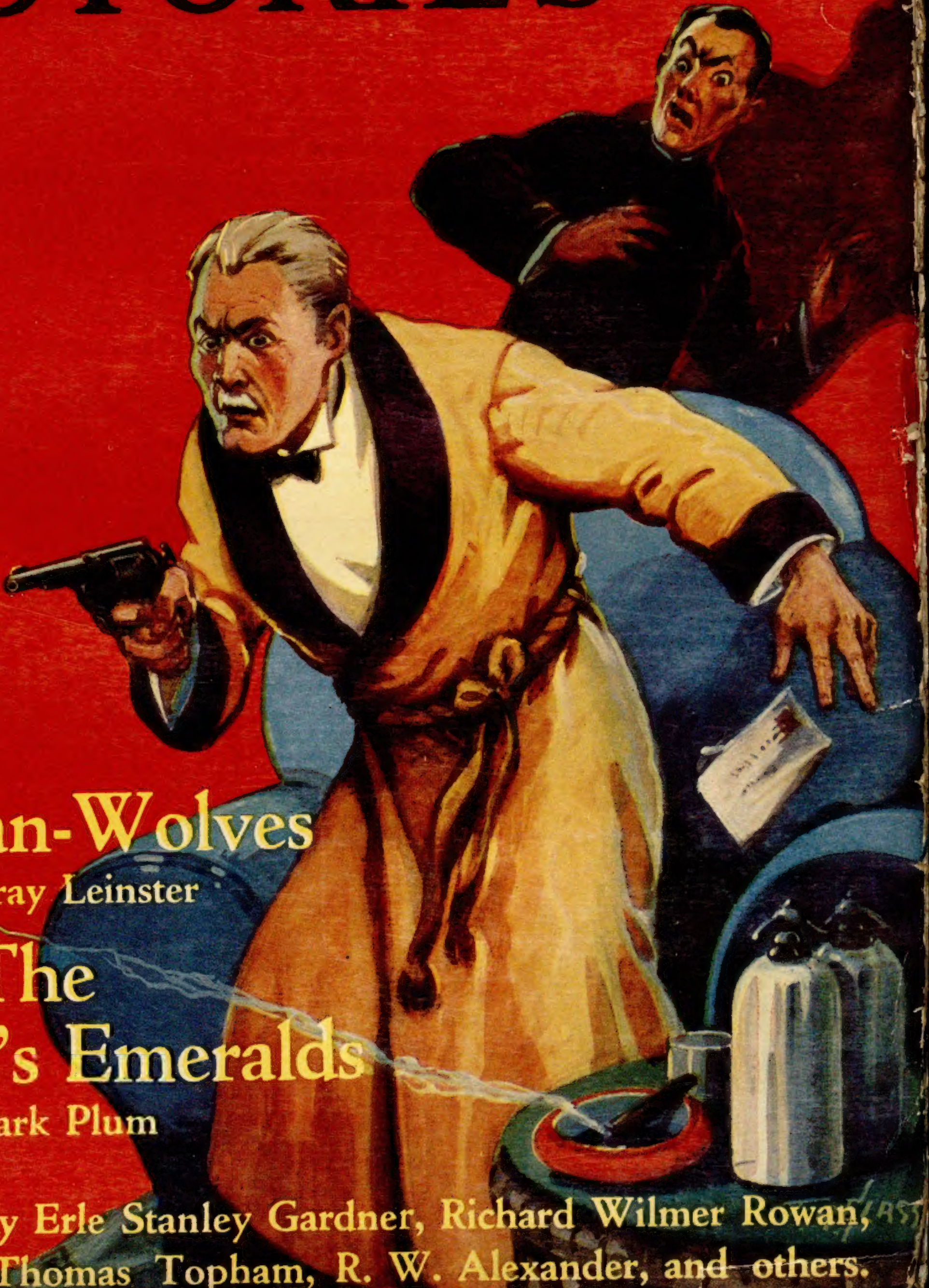

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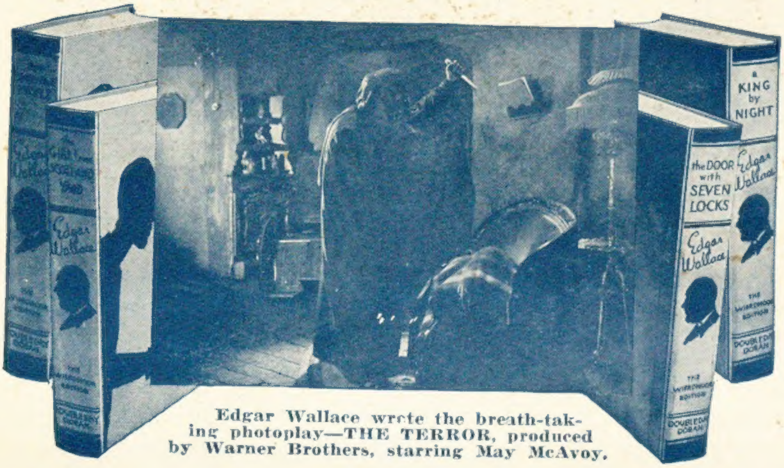

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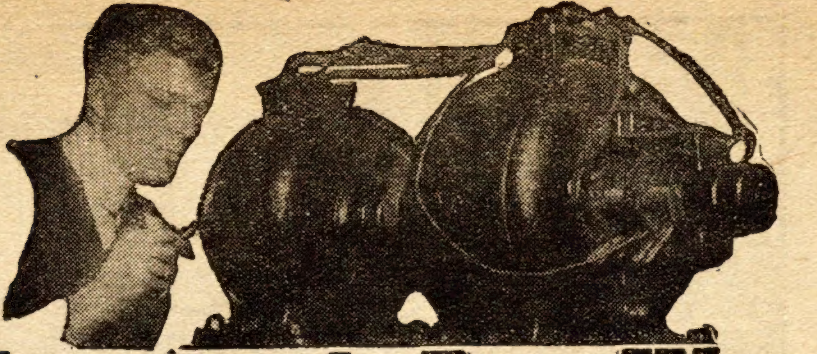

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Mystery STORIES

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Murder in the Clouds!

"BUT, Spud—supposin' that danged puma 'd bust loose in a storm?" Stake Johnson's voice quavered as he made the suggestion to the pilot of The Skyway's XX-4 passenger plane.

And back of the pilot's compartment were twelve passengers and the huge cat. Outside a gale roared about them from the southwest. Then the lights went out. Spud rushed to find the trouble. And when the lights flashed on again one of the twelve passengers lay dead.

From this point on there is excitement and mystery enough for even the hardest-boiled detective story reader, in *Laurence Donovan's* new complete novelette, THE SKYWAY MURDER, which is the feature story in the March, 1929, issue.

THE MAN-WOLVES, by *Murray Leinster,* works up to a tremendous climax and dénouement with the next instalment. If you have read the first part of the yarn, in this present number, you will certainly want to discover the cause of all the strange happenings that swirl about Carruthers and his nephew.

Mark Plum gives us a new story called THE HATPIN. And Plain John Smith again does his stuff with his usual cleverness, and sympathetic understanding of the human element which always enters into any crime.

Victor Lauriston has written a startling story in WILLIAM JAMES RAMSAY'S GRAVE. It is a yarn of the great Northwest, one of the kind that you don't see in magazine pages very often. You don't want to miss it.

SHUFFLE-THUMP IN THE DARK, by *Alan Forsyth,* is another story by the same author who wrote that exceptional tale, THE GUILT OF WEASEL GARROTT, which appeared in the November, 1928, issue. Like that yarn, it is interesting because of its peculiar originality.

INTO DISTANT LANDS WITH MISSING EXPLORERS, by *Orville H. Kneen,* is another of this writer's interesting articles on strange and unexplained disappearances. Old readers of Mystery Stories will remember ALONG POLAR TRAILS INTO THE UNKNOWN and NAVAL MYSTERIES, which appeared in these pages.

Beginning with the next issue we shall run the first instalment of a new department called LEAVES FROM A DETECTIVE'S NOTE-BOOK. These are random notes concerning the exploits, practises, and habits of professional criminals the world over, which have been compiled by *Richard Wilmer Rowan* from various sources for your information.

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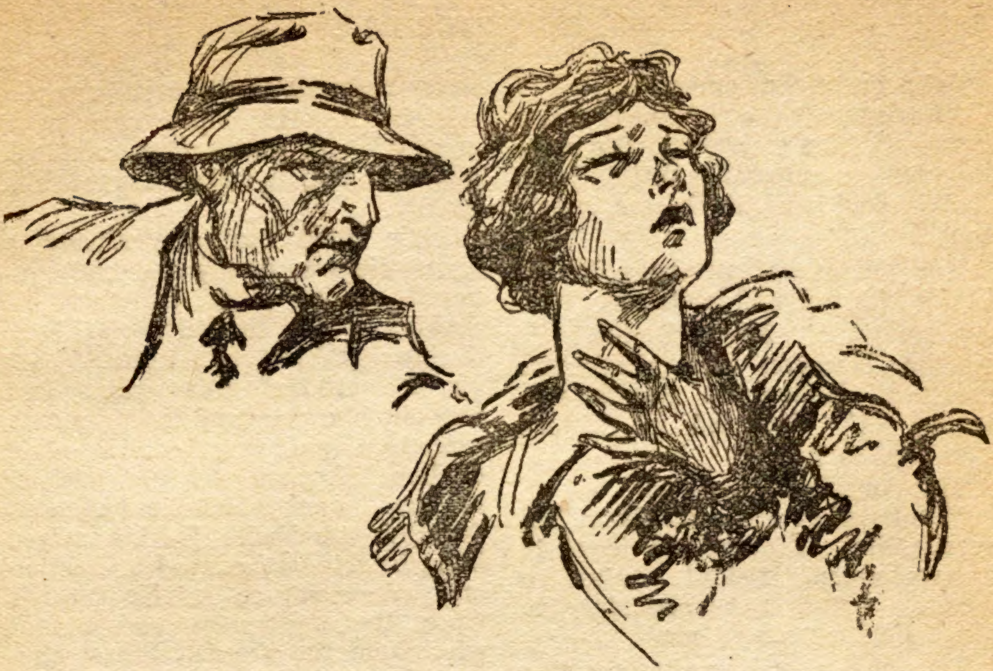


She reeled suddenly, her hand at her throat.

The Duchessa's Emeralds

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE

By MARK PLUM

A "miserable little jewel theft" and the Italian secret service conspire to break up "plain John Smith's" much needed vacation. But the state of affairs aboard the Aquitania, complicated by a cleverly-planned murder, serve to lessen his disappointment.

CHAPTER I

THE CARD PARTY

A MOROSE American of unassuming exterior lounged in his steamer chair and scowled at the palpitating ocean before him. England's shores were rapidly fading into the distance, unwatched, though not unmourned, by the majority of the ship's passengers. The Atlantic, which was restless, had driven most of them to their cabins. Only John Smith and one other remained on deck and warmed themselves with argument.

John Smith was annoyed.

"Emeralds!" he groaned accusingly. "Stolen emeralds! It's nothing but a miserable little jewel theft! And you said it was important!"

The plump and pompous Italian beside him radiated irritation.

"Important! My good man! It is the Duchessa del Vardarno's necklace! Historical! Several centuries old! Designed in Cellini's own workshop!"

The American shrugged.

"That's what every family in Europe claims of every old jewel in its possession. Cellini worked in metals. Jewels were secondary to him. So they are to me."

The plump man spoke sweetly: "May a humble member of Signor John Smith's profession ask what that gentleman does put first? If not the detection of criminals, the punishment of crime, the general pursuit of his profession, what then, Mr. Detective?"

JOHN SMITH waved a hand jauntily. The heavy sarcasm of the Fascisti secret service agent amused him.

"Right at this moment the most important thing to me is the extra week in Paris that damned misleading telegram of yours robbed me of." His mournfulness became accentuated. "You wired me that by returning home on this blamed ship I might prevent an international crime of unparalleled audacity. 'International crime'! Fiddle-sticks! 'Unparalleled audacity'! Piffle! Some crook swiped a string of green stones, and you got me, *me,* John Smith, to leave Paris, just when I had finished my work and was ready to play, to find the damned things for you! And I was going to the Bois Sunday for the races! I've never been. Why, I'd even bought a silk hat!" His voice rose to a crescendo of indignation, and the dignified Italian looked around him hastily.

Plain John Smith smothered a grin. He was deeply and truly annoyed at the plight in which he found himself. He had worked hard during his brief trip abroad, both on the original case which had brought him over and on the purely extraneous and very horrible affair of Rose Fletcher and her missing husband, upon which he had accidentally stumbled. Having solved both, he felt he deserved a vacation and was about to indulge himself when the mysterious and urgent wire from the Fascisti Secret Service Bureau had altered his plans and brought him post-haste to Liverpool. Now, irrevocably embarked upon the stately *Aquitania,* he learned that all the to-do was over the theft of the Vardarno emeralds, and he was sore. He had progressed beyond jewel robberies, he felt, and he bewailed his abbreviated vacation.

"You might explain," he continued coldly, "just where you got that 'international crime' stuff. Stuff and nonsense, really. When Gwendolyn Vanderbilt's pearls or Mary Pickford's diamonds get nabbed America doesn't make an international crime out of it and haul in the secret service of various countries to recover them. Seems to me you're making an amazing big tempest in an exceeding small teapot."

"AND you have—what do you call it?—flown off the handle without waiting to see what the tempest was about." The Italian smiled slightly. "There is much I have not yet told."

John Smith sighed.

"Let's have it," he said resignedly.

"It is complicated. The Duchessa del Vardarno is of a great—a *very* great—and very old and very much impoverished Italian family. The Vardarni, most wrongfully but with great vehemence, opposed the Fascisti régime. Naturally, they did not participate as did the loyal Italian houses in the prosperity that the Fascisti government has created. Already poor, they have steadily grown poorer."

"There was the necklace," murmured John Smith.

"Precisely. There was, as you say, the Vardarno necklace. Almost as famous as the Italian crown jewels. But you must surely know, Smith, that no historical treasures are allowed to leave Italy. It is an old law. He who sells, removes, or participates in the removal of any picture, jewel, or other listed work of art from the country is liable to heavy penalties."

"H'm," said the detective. "A bit of an *impasse* for the Duchessa. And I gather you have some suspicion as to just who it was sold, removed, or participated in the removal of that lady's emeralds."

"I have. When the necklace was stolen the Vardarni made a great commotion over the theft. Our agents took charge at once and found many peculiarities in the case. That an apparent theft was committed is certain. The affair was well planned. And we have traced the actual removal of the stones to Max Hand, a gentleman very well known to the Continental police and not entirely unacquainted in America."

"Uh huh," agreed Smith. "I know him. Of him, rather. An unpleasant person."

"Hand is on this ship. So is the Duchessa. So, we believe, are the emeralds."

His tones were portentous, and the American nodded.

"I get you, Rossi. You believe the Duchessa hired Max to steal the jewels and smuggle them into America. Is that straight?"

"Precisely."

John Smith frowned.

"But why in the name of Providence, Rhode Island, did you have to entice me away from the fleshpots of Paris? You seem to know about all that is necessary. What possible good can I be to you?"

"That is the point," announced the Italian pompously.

"At last, and thank the Lord for it!" sighed Smith.

"WE WANT, first, the emeralds. Secondly, we wish to punish the thieves. Thirdly"—Rossi dropped his voice and glanced about him—"thirdly, if it could be proved that the house of Vardarno itself is connected with the theft, it would provide an excellent weapon against these enemies of our government."

John Smith grunted. He was becoming bored.

"Rossi, old dear," he said, "if you want me in on this, you'll have to come to the point. Tell me exactly what job you have assigned to me and just why you hand it to me instead of covering it yourself. I'm growing thirsty, and about the only redeeming feature of this job so far seems to be that it is worked on an English ship. If you had picked a liner from my 'sweet land of liberty,' I would have leaped overboard and swum ashore long ago. Now, just what do you want me to do? Shadow the Duchessa, flirt with her maid, play shuffle-board with Max? Get on with it."

"You can leave Hand alone. We'll handle him. But it would be impossible for me, or for any Italian whom they did not know, to approach a Vardarno. For you, it is arranged."

"And how?" commented the detective. "I suppose my irresistible charm will so work on this Duchessa female that she will fall into my arms and confess. You've an optimistic spirit, my friend."

"You will be introduced as a big Chicago business man. Soap, I think. Soap is considered 'quaint,' and Chicago millionaires are not despised by impoverished Italian nobles. You will try to win the Duchessa's confidence. With the opportunities we will provide, you should at least be able to learn whether she, Hand, or a confederate is carrying the jewels."

"I'll bet on the lady."

"ON THE contrary, I think Hand will probably retain them until they are actually in New York. However, the Duchessa—if our suspicions are correct—will undoubtedly know where they are. Keep in touch with her at all times. If you are not able to be with her, you can at least always have an eye on her."

"Not always," John Smith interrupted flippantly. "Spare my blushes, Rossi."

He settled back disconsolately.

"Some job you've handed me! What a rotten trip this is going to be! Women! And clothes, too, I suppose. I'll have to get my one and only trunk out of the hold and overhaul my wardrobe if I'm going to entrance duchesses."

"That can be arranged. But there is no hurry. The Duchessa is not likely to come on deck to-day unless the sea quiets."

John Smith cocked a humorously despairing eye at the heaving waters.

" 'Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!' " he said. "While you're agitating the noble though probably treasonable tummy of the Duchessa, you're giving me a much needed breathing-space. Roll your damnedest!"

HE strolled down the deck toward the smoking-room. He was annoyed at Rossi for summoning him, with himself for answering the summons, and with the Duchessa for requiring his attention, but he had a few hours' respite, and the *Aquitania* Scotch was smooth and soothing.

His respite was brief. Some hidden influence had been at work, and he was placed, at dinner, near the head of the Captain's table. Opposite him was young Madeleine del Vardarno, a dark, scowling girl of flapper age. Next to her was her mother, the Duchessa, who was placed, of course, on the Captain's right.

The Duchessa del Vardarno was haggard. The Italian style of make-up, much powder and lipstick, with little rouge—was not calculated to conceal the fact. *Mal de mer* might account for her pallor, but John Smith saw an expression of strain in her eyes and noted how her breast stirred as though under some recent and violent emotion. She ate little and spoke less during the early courses, a few asides to her smoldering daughter constituting most of her conversation. With the dessert, she became calmer and inspected her fellow passengers with some interest. She had evidently been informed concerning the alleged soap manufacturer's millions, for, after letting her eyes drift regally over him, she indicated to the Captain her willingness to permit his presentation to herself.

"I have some good friends in Chicago," she said graciously, and introduced, in turn, her daughter, who nodded without speaking.

"Blithe young thing!" thought the detective as he noticed her heavy frown and indifferent glance in his direction. But his business was with the mother, and he devoted himself to his task.

The Duchessa was cordial. Though her eyes were still heavy with unguessed speculations, she was evidently at some pains to attract the supposed millionaire. At the close of dinner, she invited him to a table of bridge in her own suite, and a more conceited man might have been flattered. The experienced John Smith accepted promptly, but murmured cynically in Rossi's ear as he passed him: "Well-soaped, old boy!" and grinned at the Italian's expression.

THE detective did not expect to acquire any information so early in the voyage, but spent the evening securing his position. Like most men whose business is analysis and deduction, he was an accomplished bridge-player, and he lost to the Duchessa in the most expert fashion. When he finally withdrew from the game, he felt certain that John Smith, retired soap manufacturer, had made his permanent entrée to that lady's card-table, if not completely to her confidence.

He regretted, however, that in so doing he had apparently made an enemy. His partner against the Duchessa was a Madame Berthier, a red-faced, autocratic woman, who laid down the law to the detective in the most uncompromising fashion. She showed agitation as the evening progressed, and John Smith was sorry that he could scarcely offer to pay her share of the debt.

A little before twelve she looked into her purse, rose, and excused herself.

"I shall need some more money," she said acidly, and vanished.

John Smith felt guilty. When she returned, fifteen minutes later, her purse had apparently been replenished and her cheeks rerouged. Her attention to the game was less concentrated, however. She made several blunders. The detective feared that she had found him hopeless as a partner and was only anxious to shorten the game. It broke up at two, and he was grateful.

The night was clear and cold when he stepped from the Duchessa's sitting-room and faced the stars. It was late, but he lit a cigar for a brief turn about the deck before going in. As his match flared, a steward touched him on the arm.

"Mr. Smith, sir?"

"Yes"—surprised.

"You are wanted in the purser's cabin, sir."

The detective went hastily, astonished at the late call. He checked at the entrance, and the blood, whipped to his cheeks by the cool night air, slowly receded. In the room were four men, three of them alive.

CHAPTER II

PLAIN JOHN SMITH STEPS IN

JOHN SMITH'S eyes passed over the serious faces of the Captain and the purser, met and held for a minute the eyes of Guido Rossi, and moved slowly to the dead body which had been Max Hand. It was arranged on a couch in the center of the small room. The lamplight flooded the pallid face, which, tilted upward, disclosed a reddened stain high up on the neck. There were blood marks on his clothes, which were disarranged more than by any doctor's handling.

The detective crossed the room in a stride and touched the corpse.

"Dead several hours," he stated.

Rossi nodded.

"A deck steward found him an hour ago, on a bench on the upper deck, leaning forward against the rail as though sick or asleep. There was something odd in his position, and the man touched him. Then he called the Captain."

"On the upper deck? That is always occupied. He couldn't have been killed there."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" The purser spoke. "But late in the evening there are only a few groups up there, and it is never very thoroughly lighted." He smiled a bit grimly. "We recognize the *tête-à-tête* spirit by leaving some of the corners in semi-darkness. This little affair is going to be a blow to honeymooners all summer. We'll have extra lights strung up to-morrow."

"SCARCELY worth it for this fellow." Smith nodded contemptuously toward Max Hand's body. "He was a dirty dog, if there ever was one. There'll be few go into mourning for him."

The Captain held up an authoritative hand.

"Mr. Rossi has already spoken to that effect, Mr. Smith. It does not interest me. Max Hand, criminal or gentleman, was a passenger on my ship. He was murdered aboard it, and I intend to learn who did it and see the murderer punished."

John Smith put up his hands.

"Don't shoot, Captain. I'm innocent. As a matter of fact, I'd like to know who, how, and why myself. Suppose you spread the facts, and Rossi and I may be able to help you."

"We have very few facts. The man was stabbed with a thin, flat blade, which was inserted just above his collar and thrust backward and upward so that it penetrated to the base of his brain. Adams, the ship's doctor, states that death was instantaneous. The knife was withdrawn and the victim was pushed forward against the rail so as to provide support for the body, in order, probably, that the casual passer-by would not notice what had happened. Then the murderer withdrew."

John Smith looked thoughtfully at the dead man.

"Nerve, brains, and strength went into that taking-off," he said quietly. "I'm not hopeful, Captain."

"I intend to find the murderer." The Captain's jaw set with a click.

The detective was still examining the murdered man.

"You forgot to mention one thing in your summary. Was Hand's clothing in this condition when he was found?"

The captain nodded, but Rossi jumped excitedly into the opening.

"That's the whole point, Smith. I keep telling Captain Murray. Max Hand was murdered for the emeralds he carried. The murderer tore his clothing to bits in his anxiety to find them. And they are gone."

"Why do you believe he carried them?"

"He must have carried them. Whoever killed him unquestionably knew of their presence and slew him for their sake." He turned to the Captain. "Italy will hold you responsible, Captain Murray. I warned you and I warned the purser that the stolen emeralds were on board. You would not even let me search one of the suspect's rooms.

They will be harder to find now, but such a search has become even more necessary."

THE Captain showed annoyance. "Mr. Rossi, I must again remind you that I am in command here. This is an English ship and English law does not permit the indiscriminate invasion of privacy condoned by your country. Bring me definite evidence as to the murderer or the thief, and I will order a search made of that person's effects. Not otherwise."

"But how do we obtain the evidence until the search has been made? This is utterly absurd, Captain Murray! Absurd and insane!" The Italian's face showed acute bewilderment.

John Smith laughed.

"You don't understand the English, Rossi. They're the original law-and-order boys. Every man's home his castle, and all that sort of thing. On the Continent you make your arrest first and get your evidence afterwards. In England you've got to get the evidence first. It's quite upsetting."

He went on: "That is probably the main reason why Hand chose an English ship. He knew he would not be molested on anything less than real evidence, and real evidence is just what we lack. Somebody took a short cut where he was concerned—somebody shrewd and daring. I'd certainly like to know who it was.

"There are a few things in our favor. The murderer must be on the ship. And he can't leave it for at least five days—unless he swims the Atlantic, and it's still a trifle cool for that. That'll give us a little time. Have the stewardesses check up on the towels and laundry, Captain. The withdrawal of that knife brought blood with it. And, of course, find out who was on the upper deck and near Hand. And if any one was seen in conversation with him.

"This is elementary, Captain Murray," he added apologetically. "You will excuse the suggestions, but, after all, it is my line rather than yours. I won't usurp your authority," he ended, smiling.

THE Captain did not return the smile, although he nodded.

"I'll be glad of your help. I know your reputation, Mr. Smith, and, of course, yours, Mr. Rossi," he added, turning toward the Italian secret service man. "I recognize your standing. Nevertheless"—the grimness which had never left his features intensified—"Mr. Smith must account for his whereabouts tonight, and I shall check up on your alibi, Mr. Rossi. I do not suspect you of the murder, but neither do I suspect any other person. I do know that both of you were working to recover the stolen emeralds from a person you believed to be the thief and knew to be a dangerous criminal. It is my duty to make certain that you were not over-zealous in your pursuit of the jewels."

Guido Rossi flamed with anger, but John Smith grinned.

"You've a suspicious nature, Captain," he replied. "But I've a forgiving one. I've been playing bridge from nine until I came here—two o'clock, wasn't it?"—he looked at his watch—"in the private sitting-room of the Duchessa del Vardarno. Also present were the Duchessa, the Right Honorable Gilbert Debenham, on his way to an under-secretaryship in the British Embassy at Washington; and Madame Berthier, of whom I know nothing except that her social credentials are apparently equal to my own, since she shared the same companionship." He shot a quizzical glance at Guido Rossi, who ignored him. Guido was annoyed.

"Quite an international gathering," commented the purser. "That makes alibis for four of our passengers. Four from six hundred—all we carry on this trip—leaves only five hundred and ninety-six suspects."

GUIDO ROSSI interrupted. His speech was lively, although somewhat incoherent. He evoked the sacred friendship of Great Britain and Italy, threatened Mussolini's ire, dared the Captain and the purser to list him among the suspects, and wound up with a patriotic outburst concerning the New Italy, which filled John Smith with placid admiration, although it left him, as well as the ship's officers, outwardly unmoved.

The purser answered him.

"Well, Rossi, you spent a good deal of the evening with me. That's all to the good. Mainly arguing in favor of illegal search and seizure and violence generally. That's all to the bad. You wanted those emerals a whole lot. I think you mentioned that the recovery of them would be of some personal advantage to you—promotion and that sort of thing." He grinned. "How about letting us search your own premises?"

The Italian spread his arms wide. He gesticulated. John Smith made out that the suggestion was an insult, but that he was willing, more than willing. They might tear his room to bits, examine it piecemeal. He would acquiesce. All he asked was that the same zeal should be expended in other directions. The emeralds were somewhere on the ship. So was the murderer. They must be found.

The Captain rose.

"It is late, and I wish to inspect Hand's stateroom. There is no question of searching yours, Mr. Rossi. Mr. Parker was joking. Personally, I see no cause for amusement anywhere in this whole affair." He led the way out. "You may follow me, gentlemen. I shall be glad of your assistance in examining Mr. Hand's effects."

ROSSI followed him closely. The purser took John Smith's arm.

"Untamed sort of chap, Rossi," he said. "What do you think about it all? Do you believe he had anything to do with the murder?"

The American shook his head.

"Not a chance in the world. He's really a very decent fellow. O. K. in his own line, if a bit temperamental. The trouble is that you're the phlegmatic Britisher and you don't understand the fire-eating Italian. You work from different angles and along different ways."

"Thank God, yes!" said Parker.

John Smith chuckled.

"Keep calm, old fellow. No one will ever mistake you for a continental. 'In spite of all temptations to belong to other nations,' you'll remain a damned, cold-blooded, insular, emotion-hating, boss-of-the-world Englishman, and you'll never understand poor Rossi any more than he'll understand you." He laughed, expanding. "I was sore as the deuce at him for calling me away from Paris for an apparently trifling matter like the theft of the Duchessa's emeralds. I'm beginning to forgive him now, though. The affair has its points of interest."

"Upwards and onwards, eh? From robbery to murder. Little lessons by Oliver Optic. You prefer murder? In a professional way only, of course?"

"Oh, of course. Let that be understood. I've the gentlest nature.

Well, to tell the truth, Parker, the death of Max Hand in itself leaves me cold. Very unimportant matter. But the murder as a murder alone, personalities not included, does interest me. It has, as I said before, its little points."

They turned into the corridor leading to Max Hand's stateroom. The Captain and Rossi, more eager in the matter, were there ahead of them. Smith continued, only half joking as he said: "Don't tell Guido and spoil the nice fee I'm planning to exact. But with all due respect to the Captain's annoyance over the affair, I find it rather enticing. I'm beginning to be glad I came."

"Delighted to have you, my dear Smith. So pleased you find our little entertainment satisfactory. We strive to please. Here's your fire-eater and the Captain." He stopped at the doorway. "And, my God, there are the emeralds!"

He pointed to where, in the dead man's cabin, Guido Rossi and Captain Murray stood beside an open trunk. From the latter's hand dangled the famous necklace.

CHAPTER III

FIND THE MURDERER

JOHN SMITH let out a low whistle.

"Oh, my aunt Jemima!" he said reverently. He advanced into the room and touched the string of glittering stones. "Don't forget, Captain: anything you say will be used against you. Where'd you find them?"

Captain Murray turned a puzzled face to the detective.

"The first place we looked. In an ordinary jewel-case in the top tray of his trunk. I don't understand it."

"No," Smith agreed thoughtfully. "Peculiar business, isn't it? Scarcely the place where you would think a thief would keep a string of stolen jewels. Was the stateroom locked?"

"Yes. I had to use my pass key. You don't think the murderer had been down here, returning the emeralds, do you?"

"Not likely. Lots of unlikely things about this little affair, though." Smith meditated, obviously puzzled at the turn the matter had taken.

"We might be wrong about the murder from the start. The reason for it, I mean. Max Hand had plenty of enemies who would grab a likely chance to do him in."

"Yes. But the chance was anything but a likely one," the purser contributed. "Hand was murdered more or less in the open. Probably actually within sight of other passengers. It looks more like an emergency act for some emergency purpose, than the taking of a likely chance to get rid of an enemy."

John Smith nodded slowly.

"Of course, the murderer may have thought that Hand had the necklace on his person when he killed him. Got a bad jolt in that case. Poor devil!" He met the Captain's rebuking eye with a grimace. "You can't expect me to grieve over that fiend's removal from the world he contaminated. But I'll be with you in cleaning up the mystery of his death. The more I look at it, the stranger it becomes. I'm curious."

"There's an excellent chance," the purser said, "of getting some light on the business to-morrow from the people who were on the upper deck to-night. It is impossible that a man could be murdered in such a conspicuous spot and not be noticed by any one."

The detective shook his head.

"By no means impossible. It's amazing what things people do not notice. In my profession, I constantly come up against the most startling examples of their inattention."

ROSSI nodded. He had kept his interest focused upon the emeralds and had paid little attention to the others' talk. Now he joined in.

"That is true. The world is full of blind men who have normal eyesight. But, after all, the chief thing is the necklace, and that we have back. It is most fortunate. Italy will thank you, Captain." He held out his hand for the jewels.

Captain Murray gave him an astonished glance.

"Do you honestly expect me to hand these stones over to you, Rossi? I'm in charge of them now and they will stay so until we dock. They've caused enough trouble on my ship. Then, if the Italian consul in New York can prove your country's right to them and that they were illegally removed from Italy, I will surrender them to him. Until then, they remain in the ship's safe."

Rossi shrugged.

"As you will," he said, annoyed. "But I do not forget your attitude toward me, Captain. I am Guido Rossi, accredited agent of the Fascisti secret service, and your distrust of me is an insult to my nation. Be sure I shall make my little report."

It was the Captain's time to shrug. He turned to John Smith.

"The jewels, in my estimation, are of secondary importance. My chief wish is to find the murderer of Max Hand. If you have any suggestions, I shall be glad to hear them."

"Thanks." John Smith shook his head. "It was Rossi who hired me, you know."

"*N'importe!*" The Italian flung out a hand. "My chief purpose has been attained. The emeralds go back to Italy. You may work for Captain Murray if you like. It does not matter. I am not interested." He was petulant.

"Then I suggest that you try to find out if any one has been to Hand's stateroom since the liner sailed. There's just a chance some one might have been seen who would furnish a clue to this affair."

"More than a chance." The purser spoke, conscious of virtue. "When Rossi told me his suspicions of Max Hand—that he was the probable thief and possible bearer of invaluable stolen jewels—I told the head steward to keep a check on his cabin at all times. If any one visited him, Arno is sure to know it."

"Good enough!" John Smith spoke heartily, and even the glowering Italian nodded commendation. "Let's have a word with Arno."

WHILE Parker made use of the passage phone, John Smith examined the necklace. He let it slip between his fingers thoughtfully and swung it to and fro against the light so that the gems sparkled freshly.

"Pretty things," he said, returning the chain to the Captain. "I'll wager a woman is at the bottom of this mess. One usually is when this sort of gaudiness is at stake."

The head steward appeared at the door. Although presumably roused from his sleep, he was completely and properly clothed (as far as outward appearances went, at least), and suave as a head-waiter at the Ritz. Smith admired him enormously.

The purser asked questions. Arno

answered them and showed no surprise at their import. He had had a check kept on the stateroom as ordered. There had been two visitors to it. The Duchessa del Vardarno had twice sent notes to Mr. Hand, and shortly before dinner had visited the stateroom. She had remained about half an hour and was obviously agitated when she left. A little before midnight Madame Berthier had been seen moving very hastily down the passageway. She had knocked several times on the door, shaken it, and even called to Mr. Hand, asking admittance. She had received no answer and had finally left, even more hastily than she had come.

The men exchanged glances. The Captain frowned.

"I thought you said that the four of you who were playing bridge had remained together all evening."

"I believe I did forget to mention Madame Berthier's absence. It was very short, fifteen minutes at most, and accounted for by her desire to replenish her purse. She was my partner, and I felt guilty. There were no other absentees."

"PLEASE don't omit anything further in your report, Mr. Smith."

The Captain was stern, and the detective felt the rebuke. He had too often impressed the importance of little things upon his subordinates not to appreciate its justness. He turned to the steward.

"You know that Mr. Hand has been murdered?"

"Oh, yes, sir." Arno implied largely that, as head steward, he knew everything.

"Good! You don't happen to know who killed him, do you?"

Arno's omniscience visibly receded.

"Is any one assigned to the upper deck in the evening? Any stewards or members of the crew?"

"Not between ten and twelve, sir. The passengers up there at that time usually like to be left alone. After twelve some of my men go up to tidy things for the next day."

"Find out if any of them know what passengers were up there during the evening. Make them use their minds, Arno. Agitate their memories. It's our best chance, you know."

"Certainly, sir. I understand, sir." Nothing could alter Arno's blandness.

The detective turned to the others. "That's about our limit for tonight," he said. "It won't help us any to yank the Duchessa and Madame Berthier from their beds for questioning. Better wait until to-morrow and take it gently. I'm for bed now."

Captain Murray assented, carefully locking the stateroom as the men left.

"I'll go with you, Mr. Parker, while we put away the necklace. Good night, gentlemen."

"Sweet dreams," added the purser, and John Smith laughed.

"They will be if I have any. I've a clean conscience and a trained subconsciousness. Even flippant pursers don't haunt me."

He spoke to the silent Italian as they sought their rooms.

"You release me, then? I'm free to act for any one I wish?"

"Oh, yes. Find the murderer if you can. Until Captain Murray gets his man, I'll go in danger of handcuffs."

"Oh, I think not." Smith stretched. "Lord, I'm sleepy! And to-morrow's another day."

CHAPTER IV

A WALK WITH MADEMOISELLE

JOHN SMITH made good his boast to the purser. After a dreamless sleep, brief but refreshing, he dressed and went on deck. The morning air was stimulating, the morning sunlight sweet, but the promenade deck was still deserted. The detective felt the righteous indignation of all early risers.

"Stupid fools!" he said, condemning the late-sleeping passengers.

A slim figure came out of the door. Madeleine del Vardarno nodded curtly and started along the deck. The American called after her.

"Hi, I say! That is—mademoiselle!"

She stopped, chin raised, and waited to learn what he wanted. He felt inept and foolish, but he was anxious to talk with the girl. She looked at him gravely as he joined her.

"Mother will not be up for several hours."

"No? What a pity! May I walk with the daughter, then?"

"If you wish." He fell into step beside her, aware that his company was, for some reason, undesired, but trying to find a point of contact. They walked almost in silence, the girl returning the briefest of replies to his attempts at conversation. Finally he stopped.

"Look here," he said desperately. "You don't want me, do you? I won't spoil your walk further." He knew he was being crude, and resented the knowledge. The girl irritated him.

Her own poise relaxed.

"It isn't you especially. I don't like rich Americans."

He was startled, and she smiled slightly.

"Sorry to be rude, you know. It just slipped out."

"Oh, don't apologize. As a downtrodden American man, I'm used to it. I never before realized, though, that the beautiful directness of our young American females was shared by their continental sisters."

"Don't call me a female!" she snapped.

He was contrite.

"My dear young lady, I beg your pardon. I really do. But why do you hate rich Americans? I should think if you must have any one of my countrymen, his being rich would be preferable."

"Oh, no. They wouldn't make me marry a poor one."

"My dear child!"

"Don't call me a child!"

"*Signorina! Mademoiselle!* Most esteemed lady! I beg your pardon again. I should have known better." Her eyes were flashing, and he sought hurriedly to distract her. "To tell the truth, I'm a little disturbed this morning. I was told there was a murder committed on board ship last night."

AS SHE swung around on him, eyes wide, he wondered if he had been wise, but continued:

"Chap by the name of Hand. Stabbed on the upper deck."

She said nothing, but continued to stare at him, her face a little white. He essayed a light note.

"My steward was full of gossip this morning. Filled me full of horrors while I shaved. May be nothing in it."

"What else did he say?" She spoke in a low voice.

"Oh, told me this Hand person was some sort of international thief. Said they found an emerald necklace worth a couple of hundred thousand dollars in his trunk." John Smith was watching her keenly, wondering how much she had been told of the disappearance of the Vardarno jewels. She reeled suddenly, her hand at her throat.

"I can't—— Oh!"

He caught her as she stumbled, and held her, unwillingly conscious of her young softness, until she regained control.

"Did you hear anything more?"

"I didn't pay much attention," he said, worried at her white face. "Steward's gossip, you know."

"I don't think it's gossip." She spoke slowly, as though thinking out each word. "And I believe it is the Vardarno necklace that was found. Max Hand was suspected of stealing it. He was traced to this ship. That is one reason why we are on it. We hoped to recover our property."

"Did you know the Fascisti had an agent aboard for the same purpose?" He stopped, aware of error. He had been disturbed and his guard was down.

She regarded him quietly, her eyes narrowed, but made no comment upon his unexpected knowledge.

"The Fascisti!" She snapped her fingers. "They don't love us. Not exactly! If they ever get their hands on our emeralds, the del Vardarnos will go lacking."

"Oh, you'll get it back eventually, of course," Smith said, trying to soothe her. "But I believe the Captain does intend to turn it over to the Italian consul in New York."

"But it is ours."

"You can put in your claim, naturally." He spoke doubtfully. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "from the point of view of finding the murderer, it is a pity he didn't get the jewels."

"What do you mean?"

"We are supposing that Max Hand was killed for their sake. If the murderer had succeeded in getting them, he would be absolutely certain to be caught eventually through his disposal of them. Even if he got by the fine-tooth combing which every passenger and every bit of baggage on this ship would be sure to go through, sooner or later he would be caught when he tried to sell the jewels."

THE girl was frowning. He looked at her regretfully, wishing that he had been more considerate of her youth.

"Better talk it over with your mother," he advised.

She nodded.

"I suppose so. Mother's no good, though. She'll believe anything that she is told and take it for granted that every one will do as she wants because she is a Vardarno. It's regal, her manner, and effective with customs and things like that. In matters that really count, it doesn't get us much. If she'd let me handle things, we'd accomplish something."

The detective relaxed into a slight smile.

"I'll bet on you!" he said. "We call your sort 'go-getters' in America, and they own the country."

She frowned. She was thinking, and she resented his flippancy.

"I'll have to wake Mother, I suppose. She'll be cross. She hates being bothered before eleven."

"You might breakfast first."

She considered the suggestion seriously.

"I don't suppose it matters. I'll stop at her room on the way down. She might just happen to be awake. She has been so much upset lately."

"We can go down together."

Madeleine del Vardarno eyed him curiously, but made no objection. As they reached the Duchessa's door it opened and Madame Berthier came out. She was crying and did not notice them. John Smith flattened himself against the wall, and she rushed by without a pause. Madeleine stared after her.

"I hate that woman," she commented.

"She seems nervous," said John Smith. "An excitable temperament, I dare say."

The girl nodded.

"Interested in her, too?" She turned the door-knob. "Why don't you interview her next—Mr. Detective?" She smiled mockingly in his face and slipped inside, and the door shut behind her.

CHAPTER V

PICKING UP THE CLUES

JOHN SMITH asterisked his stupidity all through his extensive breakfast. Rossi drifted in and eyed with disfavor the ham and eggs, the wheat cakes and syrup, and the hot bread. He ordered rolls and chocolate. The American grinned at him.

"I can't live on bird-seed," he said, reaching for another muffin. "I'm a working man."

"Getting anywhere?" inquired the Italian seriously.

"Well," said John Smith blithely, "I have some ideas. Know anything about the Berthier woman?"

"Not much. She moves in a good set. She's a widow, I believe."

"Grass or sod?"

"Pardon?"

"Is her husband living or is he dead? Separated from her or in his grave?"

"Oh! Dead, I suppose. We don't have so much of the other in Europe. Not that I would blame the gentleman for running away if that is what he did do. She is assertive."

"All of that!" said John Smith, thinking ruefully of the night before.

"She lacks charm." Guido Rossi pronounced the final sentence of the continental male upon a member of the other sex. "You're wondering what she was doing at Hand's stateroom last night?"

"That and other things. I'm mamma's little wondering boy to-day. About another matter, Rossi. I was talking to the Vardarno girl this morning, and I was careless. She guessed my position in the matter. How did you get that soap-millionaire dope to her mother? So as to compromise any one when she learns that I'm just plain John Smith, without even a very little million to my name?"

The Italian frowned at him.

"That was stupid of you. No, the Duchessa was sure to make inquiries about her companions at table. We saw to it that her maid told her just what we wanted her to believe. The maid got it from one of the stewards, and he will have carefully forgotten where he heard it."

"Good boy! The kid may not tell her mother, anyway."

"Don't count on that. She probably tells her mother everything. You have the American idea of young girls. Ours are brought up very differently, you know."

SMITH smiled inwardly.

"Fat lot these sophisticated foreigners really know about their women!" he thought. "Put them into compartments—domestic angel here, cute little devil there—and treat them accordingly. From their view-point, the one type never meets the other nor, in their blood, is there ever supposed to be any intermingling of the two strains." Taking this Madeleine del Vardarno as an example of the perfectly-brought-up, meek young daughter, he felt that he knew better. The American flapper and the Italian girl, if not as like as the well-known row of pins, were very similar under their polished or painted surfaces.

He lit a cigaret and rose.

"I want to check up on who was on deck last night, and I must send some wirelesses. See you later, Rossi."

He sent the messages and drifted casually into the purser's room. When John Smith's mind was most active, his body always appeared at its laziest. His clients usually lost their tempers with him just before he presented them with the solution of their problems. At present, his brain was working overtime and his body was proportionately sluggish.

AS HE crossed the main hall, Madeleine and her mother came out of the Captain's room. Madeleine was still white, but calm; the Duchessa was visibly enraged.

"Nothing doing on the emeralds," Smith decided. "I thought Captain Murray looked like a stand-patter."

He mentioned the thought to Parker, and the purser agreed with enthusiasm.

"He is. He certainly is. Life is not all roses for us poor seamen, Mr. Smith."

"Pooh! You whose nights are spent in teaching astronomy to one pretty woman after another, and whose days are a continuous social whirl, you should try my job!" replied Smith laughingly.

"Squiring the Vardarno girl about the decks, eh? Oh, I saw you! Well, some like them young.

"You don't know what work is," he went on. "Did you ever try to explain to a thousand women on every trip why all of them can't sit next to the Captain, or listen to them scolding that they have never been seasick before and why does the Captain run his ship so fast? If he dropped the anchor when the waves were bad, they wouldn't suffer so, and they should think he would consider the feelings of his passengers more. Et cetera, and so forth. Oh, mine's a gay life! And now you add a murder to my other chores!"

"Me? I never did!"

"Well, why don't you solve it, then? That's your job. Mine is wet-nursing dowagers and finding amusement for flappers—preferably dark amusement with piercing eyes and clean-shaven—and kissing the baby. At least, most of the passengers seem to think that is all I have to do."

"You seem disturbed this morning. This is not your usual sunny spirit."

"Oh, no!" The purser continued bitterly: "Just the customary little morning visitations. The only addition is that the Captain has been chevying me all about the place because I can't find any one who saw Hand killed. My God! He seems to think the murderer should have waited until he was sure a dozen or so passengers were looking right at him and then slain his victim. I can't manufacture evidence! If no one saw the dirty work, I can't make them say they did. But he keeps on saying: 'The murderer must be found! The murderer must be found!' like some damned phonograph. I wonder if he thinks I've got him concealed behind the fresh-air ventilator!" He stopped, a little ashamed of his outburst.

John Smith nodded understandingly.

"I know. I go through with that with some one in nearly every case

I handle." He stopped and lit his pipe. Puffed it comfortingly, then went on: "Did any one see anything at all, Parker? Trifles are often important in a case like this."

The purser shoved over a list of names.

"Those people were on the upper deck between ten and twelve. None of them knew Max Hand, but when told where he was sitting, several remembered seeing him there. A couple of them recalled seeing some women stop or pass slowly by him, but they weren't sure on that point. One, Robert Thomas"—he checked the name with his pencil—"a hard-headed chap from Glasgow, really saw something."

"The murder?" Smith asked hopefully.

"NO SUCH luck! He said that about eleven o'clock a steward stopped and spoke to the man sitting where we told him Hand had been. A few minutes later—ten perhaps—a woman, thin, not tall, in dark clothes, stopped beside him for at least a minute. He said she gave an impression of shabbiness. He laughed at himself for saying it. Said it was dark, of course, and he didn't notice her particularly."

"He doesn't sound like an imaginative chap," said John Smith.

"No. I'll swear he isn't one. If the woman struck Robert Thomas as being shabby, I'll bet she was shabby."

"Anything else?"

"One more. He said half an hour or so later—he was thinking of turning in—he noticed another woman pass rather quickly along the deck, and he thinks she also stopped for a moment, but he won't swear to it."

"H'm! Noticing chap, this Thomas. Two women and one man. Is a steward a man, Parker?"

"Not when he calls me at six, as he did this morning. But when a wide-eyed person like Robert Thomas from Glasgow says a steward stopped by Max Hand between ten and twelve, and when no steward aboard this ship can be induced to admit that he was on the upper deck anywhere between those mystic hours, then, for the purposes of our investigation, a steward is very much a man."

"It would seem so, if he isn't a fraud."

"What do you mean?"

"A clever villain masquerading as a steward could get closer to the deceased gentleman than could, say, some known enemy of the man if he approached in his own make-up."

The purser meditated.

"That's an idea, of course." But he spoke doubtfully.

"Well, we'll keep it for the present. We haven't any too many. How about Thomas himself? Are you sure he's telling the truth? Couldn't be personally involved?"

"Lord, no! Wait till you see him! He's as respectable a Scotchman as ever watered a penny and watched it grow. He's all right. He'd squeeze a shilling till it hollered, but he'd die before he'd steal one. His kind don't murder."

"I recognize the type. Can't be imitated, either. Well, it's a question of how much he's helped us."

"I don't see that he's helped at all"—dolefully.

"You never can tell. Let us not be down-hearted. Got an accurate watch, Parker?"

"It's all right. Want to borrow it?"

"No. I want you to time me. Could a woman, moving quickly when she thought she was unobserved, and moderately in the more open spaces, have left the Duchessa's cabin on A deck, spent several minutes rapping at Hand's stateroom on B deck, gone from there to the upper deck, stayed not less than a minute, returned to her own cabin, washed herself (allow about five minutes here), and gotten back to the Duchessa's in fifteen minutes all told?"

"She'd have to be some sprinter."

"I'd like to try it."

"Full of zeal, aren't you? Scientific feller. All right, wilt your collar if you must." He timed the detective, grinning as John Smith sped through the corridor, slowed to a dignified, if still hurried, step in the hall, sped up a little on the upper deck, and back to the starting place outside the Vardarno stateroom.

"NINE minutes even," he announced, snapping the watch. "That leaves six for the wash-up. But I say——" A thought struck him. "She didn't change her dress, did she? If you're thinking that she did the murder, it would certainly be blood-stained."

"Not necessarily. She was bare-armed, of course, and the murderer probably struck from behind." He frowned, thoughtful. "What asses we are, Parker! Of course, she'd have worn a coat. Robert Thomas would certainly have remarked her, *décolletée*. It was chilly after eleven, too. Phone Arno," he directed, "and find out if the lady was cloaked when she went to Max Hand's stateroom."

The purser reached for the ship's phone.

He talked into it for a few minutes, then turned back, his expression grim.

"Arno says that the steward who saw Madame Berthier in the corridor said she was wearing a cloak and a dark scarf of some sort over her hair." He put the phone down. "We're getting there, Smith."

"Maybe so. Maybe not."

"She must have gone outside if she put on a coat. Where else but in search of Hand? She was pretty anxious to see him, according to the steward's testimony."

"True." John Smith rose. "She's tied up in it some way, I feel sure. Whether she actually murdered him or not is another question. If she really was one of the people who stopped near Hand, she was the last one Thomas saw. It was nearer twelve than eleven when she left the card-room. And Thomas said the last woman's stop was so brief that he would not even swear she stopped at all."

"He admits that he didn't notice particularly."

"No? He strikes me as a singularly noticing gentleman. Well, we've got four days left, Parker."

"Three and a half. We dock at noon Friday."

"The world was made in six. Don't be despondent, old dear. And tell the Captain things are progressing. It will encourage him, whether true or not." And he departed, humming "Gather Ye Roses."

CHAPTER VI

"MRS. HAND"

JOHN SMITH spent the afternoon in the smoking-room. When the purser found him there behind a Scotch highball, he explained with dignity that he was correlating his impressions.

"If you know what that means," returned Parker, and the detective complained that he was not understood. Parker withdrew, after a facetious remark that brought chuckles from the neighboring people. John Smith joined them and became friendly. He led the conversation to the murder, but heard nothing of importance. On the whole, it was a wasted afternoon, although the Scotch was good.

Dinner was similarly a blank. The Duchessa and her daughter dined in their own rooms, and John Smith was conscious of some regret. The girl was pert, of course, but stimulating, and he would have liked her company. Since she was not available, he resigned himself with a sigh to business, and, waylaying Madame Berthier, proposed a promenade. It was a failure. She accepted after some hesitation, but proved adept at keeping away from the subjects he wished to discuss. And he was not yet ready for direct questioning.

He spoke of Max Hand, and she spoke of the Vardarno necklace. He mentioned the murder, and she bemoaned the Duchessa's distress over her lost emeralds. She stated vigorously and at length what she thought of the Captain's refusal to surrender the jewels to her titled friend, until finally, unable either to guide her torrent of words or to stop it, John Smith fled.

At the smoking-room door he encountered the purser.

"Again! I hope the Scotch holds out!"

"So do I. I need it! If I have to interrogate Madame Berthier any more, I'll be taking to straight absinthe."

"Questioned her about the murder, have you?"

"No. Just started a casual chat in that direction. But she wanted to tell me what she thought of the Captain. It seems the brute—she may have said 'robber,' I'm not sure—refuses to give the emeralds to their rightful owner. She had forcible views on the subject, and she detailed them at great length, till I fled."

"Ran away, did you? Fie upon you, Smith! You might at least let the poor woman express her opinion."

"Express it! My God! If she only would! She sent it by slow freight!" He escaped into the lounge, and the purser went downstairs chuckling.

THE morning was, as John Smith remarked, another day. After breakfast, ungraced by either Madeleine's or her mother's presence, he sought the wireless house. His messages had been answered, and the answers were interesting. He bore them to the purser.

Parker read them and sat up.

"So Madame Berthier was the wife of our murdered friend, was she? That's interesting news!"

"Oh, undoubtedly. Though I don't know just what difference it makes."

"She was probably more involved in the whole affair than we thought."

"Well, we knew she was involved, anyway. Does this mean she killed him or that she was trying to warn him? That she stabbed the man or found him stabbed when she reached him?"

Parker frowned and agitated his watch chain.

"You put things so flatly, Smith," he complained. "I was never good at riddles."

"It *is* a riddle. And this new fact may mean much or it may mean nothing." He sighed. "We'll have to talk turkey to her now, at any rate. Have her down, will you? But stay by me, Parker. I may need protection. She is not an agreeable woman, Parker."

"At that, she had it over her spouse."

The detective nodded grimly, and the purser sent the order. The two men smoked silently, fortifying themselves, until Madame Berthier arrived.

She entered impetuously, and the two men rose. She evidently resented the imperious summons, but as she opened her mouth to make protest, John Smith spoke: "Mrs. Hand, I believe," and the protest died away in a gurgle. Slowly the vitality left her face, and she shrank into the chair which the purser had shoved forward, like an old woman. Her hands were shaking.

"How did you know?" she whispered.

"The Paris police have a remarkable system of records. They knew every fact concerning Max Hand. They knew he had married, twelve years ago, a wealthy woman, who left him after he had run through most of her money, and took the name of Madame Berthier. But they believed that the lady kept in touch with her husband even though they lived apart."

SHE did not deny it, but sat trembling as though in an ague, her cheeks ashen. Her assurance and imperiousness were gone.

"Does every one know? Must the Duchessa know?" she asked.

"No one knows yet except ourselves. Whether the Duchessa or any one else learns the facts depends upon developments. We are trying to clear up the mystery of your husband's death. Will you help us?"

"How can I? I only know that he was dead when I stopped beside him."

"You did go to him, then? When you left the card-table?"

She looked at him blankly, her mind too dazed even to note that it was the alleged soap-millionaire who was questioning her.

"Oh, yes. I had to talk to him. I had to!"

"What about?"

"I can't tell." She spoke drearily. John Smith was suddenly aware of a great pity for her, unloved, unlovable, old woman, with the world she had built up about her falling to pieces as she sat; her carefully hidden secret, her relationship to a notorious criminal, on the verge of public exposure. He continued his examination more gently.

"You went to his stateroom and then to the upper deck in search of him?"

"Yes. He had said he might be there. I saw him leaning forward against the railing. I thought he was asleep, although it was not like him to sleep in an open place like that. He had enemies. I touched him. His head rolled over, and I knew. Then I ran away."

"You did not call for help, or tell any one of his death?"

"No." She seemed indifferent to their thoughts of her. "Some one was sure to find him. I was afraid my connection with him would be learned. He had black-mailed me long enough. You don't know all the things he has made me do for him! I left him there, dabbed on some fresh rouge, and went back to the card game."

"Have you any suspicion who killed him?"

"No. He had a great many enemies."

THE detective finished and sat back, meditative.

"You don't help me much," he complained.

"That is all I know."

"Well," he said, dismissing her, "we will keep our knowledge of your connection quiet if we can, Madame Berthier. It may become necessary to have your testimony. But don't worry until the time comes."

She turned a haggard face to him.

"You don't know," she said, and vanished.

The two men looked at each other.

"Don't know what?" inquired the purser irritably.

"Anything, I should say. Damned little, at any rate. But I should like to know what she meant."

"So should I. Decidedly. Do you believe her story?"

"Oh, yes. She's telling the truth as far as she goes. She didn't kill Hand, and I don't believe she knows who did, but she's keeping something back just the same."

"You might scare her into telling you."

"I might. But, damn it, Parker, I can't torture a frightened rabbit. That's what she looked like. Remember how commanding and assertive she was, even last night? Well, she's broken now."

He rose.

"Tell the Captain, of course. But keep it quiet otherwise. If I decide that bullying that poor female will clear up the murder, you can tell him I'll bully her. Not otherwise. And at present I don't think she knows any more about that particular incident than we do."

"I'M WITH you." Parker put out a detaining hand as the detective started to rise. "There's another matter—rather curious. The Duchessa says she isn't sure the necklace found in Hand's room is hers. Says he was a notorious thief, and she wants to see it to make sure. Captain Murray is holding a little private exhibition of the jewels at one, when most of the passengers will be at lunch. Guido Rossi insists on being present. Come along, too, if you like."

"Quite a little party," commented John Smith. "I'll be there. Wonder what bee the Duchessa has in her bonnet now?"

"Search me! She says she must identify the stones so that she will be able to take immediate steps for their recovery after landing."

"Fat chance she's got! Frankly, Parker, I think Captain Murray should return them to her. She'll have a pretty time getting them otherwise."

The purser was loyal.

"It has been argued considerably. Rossi insists, since he realizes that he can't personally get them, that the stones are illegally out of Italian territory, and that the Italian consul is the neutral and legal party to receive them and return them to the place they came from. Just as the Captain first suggested. He states that they would have no power to prevent the Duchessa from disposing of them in America if they were surrendered to her here. She can sue for their recovery when she gets back to Italy. She'll probably get them. They are unquestionably hers."

"And the courts are controlled by her enemies. Well, it's not my business." And John Smith went out.

CHAPTER VII

THE DUCHESSA SEES HER JEWELS

THE four men waited in the Captain's office. Chattering passengers in search of lunch passed the door. Outside, the sea was calm; the air was sparkling, and reassuring to the most timid stomach. John Smith looked out of the window and sighed. He hoped the little formality upon which the Duchessa had insisted would be quickly over. He was hungry.

On Captain Murray's desk was the closed jewel-case. Close to it cuddled a grim revolver. The Captain considered that trouble enough on his ship had been caused by those emeralds. He was taking no chances.

The Duchessa swept in regally, with her daughter beside her. The detective looked at Madeleine. She was white and quiet, a slim shadow of her imperious mother. Her eyes took in the gun beside the jewel-case, and John Smith thought that the flicker of a smile quirked her lips.

They stopped at some distance from the Captain, and he rose and bowed formally. The Duchessa inclined her head slightly, and the purser smothered a grin.

"No love lost there since that little argument the other day," he whispered to the detective.

The Duchessa fixed her lorgnette and held out a hand.

"I will look at these stones which you say are mine but which you insist upon giving to another person."

Captain Murray did not answer the gibe, but put the case in Madeleine del Vardarno's hand as she walked over to receive it. She bore it back to her mother, and they lifted out the gleaming string and examined it, stone by stone. The Duchessa smiled coldly.

"I am satisfied," she said, "and I make formal demand upon you, Captain Murray, to surrender my property."

GUIDO ROSSI moved excitedly, but the Captain put up a stern hand.

"The matter has been settled, Duchessa. Italian law provides that treasures of this sort may not be removed from that country. Mr. Rossi, who is an accepted agent of Italy——"

"Of Italy!" The Duchessa laughed briefly and scornfully.

"Of the present government of Italy." The Captain corrected himself. "Mr. Rossi states that since the jewels were illegally removed from his country and recovered aboard this ship, his country will hold me—that is, the company of which I am the employee—responsible for their safe return to his nation. He states justly that you could not be prevented from disposing of them if they were surrendered to you now. He argues that you can claim your property through legal channels after it is returned to the country from which it was stolen. I have wirelessed the head of my company, so great has been my own perplexity in this matter, and he has indorsed my original plan of surrendering the emeralds neither to Mr. Rossi nor to you, but to the neutral and legal representative of your country, the Italian consul at New York. And such is my unalterable determination."

He held out his hand, but Madeleine stood still, holding the glittering gems.

"Mr. Rossi" — the young girl turned to him, her voice sharp— "what must we do to recover the Vardarno jewels, our family's property for centuries?"

The Italian seemed to John Smith to suppress a smirk.

"Proper demand through proper channels will, of course, procure them for you after you prove your ownership." He smiled outright then, and the detective became conscious of a strong desire to kick him. "Of course, signorina, you will probably also be required to prove your family's innocence of any complicity in the removal of the emeralds from Italy."

"Oh, that's the catch, is it?" interrupted John Smith. "In other words, you hold them guilty until proven innocent?"

The girl spoke bitterly.

"Oh, worse than that. Guilty even *if* proven innocent. Even in unbiased courts we could scarcely prove that we were not involved in the theft, now that the thief is dead. Where the courts are controlled by those who hate us, what chance have we of recovering the jewels they wish for themselves?"

SHE moved slowly toward the Captain with the emerald necklace in her hand. She stopped by the open window.

"The del Vardarno jewels shall never go to strengthen the enemies of our house!" she cried, and her strong young arm curved upward and outward.

Guido Rossi uttered a cry and rushed forward. But the jewels flashed through the sunlight, glittering a minute as they fell, and disappeared beneath the water. A following gull swooped futilely above the tiny ripple.

The Duchessa's hand was at her breast. A glance at her horrified face convinced even the Captain that she had not anticipated her daughter's action.

"Madeleine!" she cried feebly.

Guido Rossi grabbed the girl by the shoulder and shook her.

"You thief! You young devil!" he cried. A string of foreign oaths rolled from his lips.

John Smith thrust him back forcibly.

"It's done and it can't be undone. And if you ask me, it's your own fault."

"I didn't ask you. You——"

"Be quiet, Mr. Rossi!" The Captain spoke sternly. "You can do no good by your outburst. In fact, if I had fully understood your plans about the stones, my own actions might have been different. That does not alter the fact, however, that an outrageous thing has been done." He turned sternly to the young girl. "The perpetrator of it will be punished. That I promise."

"I shouldn't be quite so free with promises," interrupted John Smith.

Captain Murray turned an astonished eye on him.

"For just what are you going to punish Miss del Vardarno?" he went on easily. "The jewels were her mother's. You certainly can't accuse her of theft. We all heard Rossi, here, practically tell her that his nation was going to steal them from her. It's a pity, of course, that she believed him. The Fascisti naturally, don't care any more than the next fellow about enriching their enemies, but they're honest folk, and Rossi's threat undoubtedly originated in his own brain."

THE Italian moved violently, and Smith put up his hand.

"I'd go a little slowly if I were you, Rossi. Consider your own position. With the emeralds in your possession, your country might or might not have pulled the dirty trick you suggested they would. As I said, I don't believe they would. And there is no question but that it was that threat of yours which induced the signorina to throw away the jewels. You're going to have a hard time explaining that. The Italian minister is certain to repudiate your rotten threats, and he's pretty apt to repudiate you along with them. Think it over, old dear."

The Italian was white. John Smith's words were too obviously true to be ignored. The detective turned to the Captain.

"You spoke of punishing this young, misguided, and impetuous child. On what grounds?"

Captain Murray bit his mustache, hesitated and then suddenly surrendered.

"There are none," he admitted. "I'm helpless." He turned to the Duchessa. "Madame," he said, "I regret this whole affair more than I can say."

She ignored him. She seemed already to have recovered her composure.

"Come, Madeleine," she said.

The purser drew a long breath as the door shut behind them. He looked at his watch.

"My God!" he said. "Ten minutes! I feel like a man who has been through a cyclone."

"The female of the species," agreed Smith, "can at times create that effect. Especially when young." He rose. "I would suggest lunch."

CHAPTER VIII

THE DETECTIVE IS BOUNCED

THE purser saw little of John Smith during the rest of the voyage. He did catch a distant glimpse of him in close converse with Robert Thomas, and in the steward's room found him and Arno with their heads together. He came upon him in a dark corner communing with the Duchessa's maid, and that same afternoon found him stepping out of Madame Berthier's cabin. He shook his head reprovingly.

"Are you trying to start a scandal on this chaste ship?" he inquired. "What if young Madeleine had seen you?"

"She is about to see me," replied the detective cheerfully. "She and her mother come next upon my list."

The purser regarded him with awe.

"My God, he's a Mormon!"

"Don't be an idiot! When may I see the Captain?"

"Nothing if not thorough, are you?" replied the irrepressible Parker. "Don't you want to investigate me, too?"

"I'm afraid of what I might learn. When can I see your Captain?"

"Persistent feller! Now if you like. He has been asking for you, too. Strange tastes some people have!"

CAPTAIN MURRAY showed some embarrassment when the detective entered.

"I wanted to see you, Smith," he began, then hesitated.

"This has been a difficult voyage for me," he went on finally. "I admit no outside authority in the handling of my ship, but murder is a different matter. I've been in communication with the head office concerning Max Hand's death, and they've put the case up to Scotland Yard."

John Smith hepled him out.

"Who, as usual, prefer to have no outsiders butting in."

"Exactly. But I asked you to look into the case," the Captain went on, "and you will, of course, be paid for what time you have put on it."

The detective made a gesture of dismissal.

"Let it go at that. The amusement I'll get watching Scotland Yard's guesses is cheap at half the price." He laughed. "I don't mind, Captain. I'm a bit glad to be a free man again."

"I appreciate the way you take it, Smith. You see how I'm placed, I hope."

"Perfectly. And I bear no resentment, Captain."

Outside the door, John Smith met the purser.

"Parker," he said, "your Captain is a strong, stern man. Never tell him that the reason I wanted to see him was for the same purpose that he wanted to see me."

"Elucidate."

"He wanted to boot me out of the case. That is, he didn't want to. Kind of embarrassed he was, sweet man! But he had orders to leave it up to Scotland Yard. He thinks I have a noble soul because I received the G. B. so calmly. I hope he never learns how badly I wanted to be bounced."

"Why this strange desire?"

"I will tell you," said John Smith solemnly, "at nine P. M. to-morrow evening, after landing. Call for me at my flat, and we will discuss various matters of interest. After which I will show you New York."

"You're on," said the purser.

CHAPTER IX

"A RETIRING SPIRIT"

THE two men sat in John Smith's comfortable living-room. Bottles and a siphon stood upon the table, flanked by a box of deep brown Coronas. George Parker gave a sigh of content.

"You do yourself well," he said. "Why do you ever roam?"

"One meets," the detective replied sententiously, "so many interesting people."

"And then one loses them. Such as your little friend, Madeleine del Vardarno. The élite of New York have already surrounded her and her mother. Even real soap manufacturers are barred in future, I fancy."

"Oh, well, she was a little exciting for daily wear."

"She was!" agreed the purser sadly.

They smoked in silence for a few minutes.

"Did you formulate any theories about Max Hand's killing before you were called off it?" the purser asked.

"And didn't I just thank Heaven they called me off it before it became necessary to tell them what I knew!"

"You do know something, then?"

"Heaps, my dear man, heaps! I know who killed him, for instance."

"The deuce you do! Who?"

"Swear never to tell?"

"Good God, Smith! You don't mean you're going to keep it a secret!"

"I am. So are you. Swear!"

The purser grumbled.

"I suppose I'll never learn if I don't."

"Very true."

"I ought to have you arrested as an accessory after the fact."

"You should. But you won't. You're too curious."

"Well, who killed him?"

"Madeleine del Vardarno."

The purser put down his cigar, reached over, and felt his friend's wrist, then placed a hand upon his brow.

"WHEN did you first feel like this, Smith? Did it come on suddenly?"

"I'm serious." The detective was curt.

"But—— Good Lord, man! That child!"

"That child is sixteen,—strong, clever as the devil, *and* a del Vardarno. There's a thousand years of taking by force and keeping by force behind her. She did it, all right."

The purser relit his cigar.

"I need support," he said. "Tell the story."

"It's short and not exactly sweet. It starts in Italy with the impoverished Vardarni. They owned two palaces, priceless pictures, and fabulous jewels, none of which they could sell. In the meantime they were starving."

"Oh, say!" put in Parker.

"I mean it literally. The Vardarni have never been wealthy. The war had practically wrecked them, and their antagonism toward the Fascisti didn't help them any. It's a good, strong, middle-class government and has done so much to improve Italy's standing that most of the aristocracy have come over to it now. But not the Vardarni. They're not the changeable sort.

"They had two alternatives: the marriage of Madeleine to some wealthy man, soft enough to be willing to support the whole family, or the disposal of some of the family treasures. Madeleine was a bit young and violently opposed to the first measure. So they decided upon the latter.

"While trying to find a safe way to get the jewels out of the country, Madame Berthier stepped into the picture. Her husband, as usual, was making demands upon her. She was by way of being a confidante of the Duchessa. She proposed that a friend of hers, Max Hand, should fake a robbery, smuggle the stones to America, and sell them on a commission basis. The Duchessa fell for it. She did insist, however, upon accompanying the bearer of the stones. The mere presence of a Vardarno, she probably felt, would keep the man tractable.

"Max Hand?"

"Max Hand. Tractable was scarcely the word for him, was it? She became suspicious of him for some reason, and the first afternoon aboard she demanded the jewels. They had a rare scene. Max laughed at her. Asked her if she intended to advertise that she had hired him to steal, smuggle, and sell the stones.

"I am inclined to believe Madame Berthier when she says she had really believed that Max would play his part of the game straight. She thought he would value her connection with the Duchessa too much to throw it away. I imagine he did blackmail people upon information which his wife got for him, but a bird in the hand is always worth two in the bush for such gentry as Hand. She must have been wild, though, when the Duchessa denounced him. Then she made her appointment with Hand to try to make him stick to the agreement.

"Optimist, wasn't she?"

"No. She was desperate. The Duchessa's favor was all that kept her in her old place in the social world. That removed, she would sink to the depths. And she had never completely gauged her husband's baseness. So she made her appointment."

"And was too late?"

"YES. Madeleine del Vardarno had been there before her. The child conceived and planned the murder perfectly. She bribed a steward to find out where Hand was and not to tell that she had sent him. Then she put on a dark cloak and hat of her mother's maid, took an old, thin letter knife—probably some dagger of bygone Vardarni—stopped behind Max, put her hand across his eyes, and said: 'Guess who this is!' He laughed, she said, a nasty, conceited laugh, and while he was laughing, she killed him."

"She told you this?"

"Partly. I was pretty sure of my facts and bluffed her a bit. I pieced it together. Even her mother doesn't know yet. Never will hear it all, probably.

"She put her hand under his coat, found the packet of jewels her mother had learned he carried there, tore them away, dropped the dagger overboard, went back to her stateroom, washed carefully, and slept soundly all night."

"My God!"

"Yes." John Smith regarded the purser benignly. "Vigorous little thing, isn't she?"

"BUT the jewels? You said she took the jewels. Did she put them back in Hand's cabin?"

"You misjudge her. She kept the jewels. The ones she threw overboard were paste. Max Hand tried to pass them on the Duchessa when she demanded her own jewels. Madame Berthier believes that his real scheme—what he had the paste ones made for—was to pass them over to the Duchessa, and then give a hint to the customs officials or to Rossi that she had them. Then, while they were mulling over the false ones, he'd sneak through with the real."

"The clever devil!"

"Not quite clever enough. The Duchessa had lived with those jewels. She knew their weight and color perfectly. She spotted the fake as quickly as I did."

"Oh, so you were on to it, too?"

"I knew they were imitation from the moment I first took them into my hands. Knowing jewels is part of a detective's job. These were far too light in weight, and the wrong color too.

"Something I said to Madeleine next morning about its being lucky that the murderer didn't get away with the necklace put the new idea into her head. She realized that she would be much safer—her possession of the real jewels would be much less risky—if all concerned thought them buried in the Atlantic. And she knew, of course, that the first expert who handled them would spot the fake. Then the whole gang would start out on the trail again. So she planned that little comedy for our benefit."

"Well!" The purser for once was speechless. Finally he said seriously: "It's scarcely your usual line, is it, to help the murderer get away with the goods?"

"No, it is not. But Max Hand's death is a blessing to the world, the emeralds really belong to the Vardarni, and, after the talk I had with Madeleine, I'm inclined to believe she has learned a little wisdom."

"I doubt it."

"Maybe not. But I won't help hang that sixteen-year-old kid. One of her main reasons for the murder was her certainty that she would be rushed into an undesired marriage if they were gone. The recovery of the necklace was her one hope."

"They'll never sell them now. They wouldn't dare."

"They could sell the stones individually. Even that way, they'd get a couple of hundred thousand out of them. A fortune to Italians."

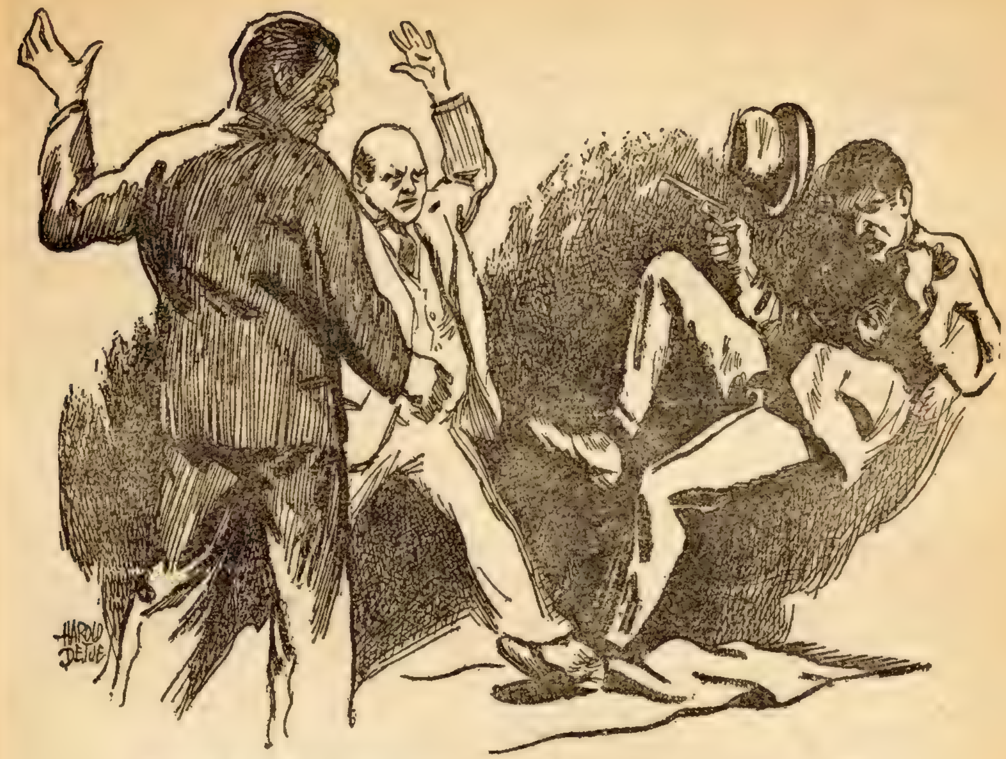
George Parker sat gazing at his smoke rings. Suddenly he chuckled.

"They are not planning to marry her off immediately, at any rate," he said.

"Where did you glean that information?"

"The Right Honorable Gilbert Debenham told me this morning. He said that the Duchessa was planning to put Madeleine in an American school for a year or so. She does so admire the vigorous, independent spirit of the American girl. She hopes that association with them may develop that same assurance and ability to take care of herself in her daughter. Madeleine, I gather from Debenham, has too retiring a spirit."

"Oh, my aunt Jemima!" murmured Smith softly.



Suddenly his heel caught on a rug and he fell heavily to the floor.

The Magnificent Thief

By THOMAS TOPHAM

The Duke prided himself on being a "magnificent thief." He scorned petty crimes and petty criminals. To him a haul of less than "ten grand" was hardly worth the trouble to acquire it. But it is the irony of Fate that sometimes the barest slip-up will tip the scales in the wrong direction. And then—what price magnificence?

"SO YOU think Tip Wallace was playing in hard luck when he was nabbed over that Dunraven robbery?" asked Ches Willard.

"Yeah," answered "Ironsides" Donnelly briefly.

Ches Willard looked at the third man in the group, a small, nervous individual called "Milky" Katz.

"And you?" asked Willard.

"Yeah, I think he was unlucky, too," admitted Milky Katz.

"Unlucky! Bah!" said Mr. Chester Willard with deep disgust. "Dumb—that's what you mean. Ninety-nine out of every hundred crooks are so dumb they don't know what it's all about. And Tip is one of the ninety-nine."

Having given utterance to this conviction, Chester Willard, known in the under-world as "The Duke" because of his lordly manners, his worldly air, and his rich apparel, leaned back in his chair, inhaled smoke from a gold-tipped cigaret, and smilingly regarded his two companions.

The three were gathered around a table in Jerry the bootblack's outlaw barroom, and The Duke had provided the best liquor to be had.

Ironsides Donnelly gazed back with a puzzled air at The Duke.

"How do you mean Tip's dumb?" he asked. "I always looked on Tip as a first-class, A number one prowler. It certainly wasn't nothin' but luck that got him in the jail-house. I was up to see Tip in the jail, an' he slipped it to me himself that it was only accidental that a cop stopped him when he was drivin' his heap. The cop flashes his light on 'im. Tip had put his gat on the seat, an' the cop lamps it an' takes him up for investigation—an' so they found the stuff."

THE DUKE waved his cigaret.

"Accidental that he was arrested, I grant you," he said. "But having his rod out on the seat, even at night, was dumb, although that isn't what I mean at all. What would Tip have got out of this prowl of his if he had made his getaway? As I understand it, his take was less than a grand in stuff, which would have brought him perhaps twenty per cent fenced. He goes up for five years to life, which is exactly the same as he'd have got if he'd pulled a twenty-thousand-dollar job. There's the dumb part, pulling such jobs as he did for such a piker amount."

"I don't get you," confessed Ironsides. "How'd poor old Tip know he would only get that much? You've got to take a chance—good haul sometimes, a flop on the next."

The Duke again waved his cigaret, this time in irritation.

"He should have known," he declared. "A man is a sap to risk his liberty, much less his life, for less than ten thousand dollars. That's what I'm trying to tell you. I wouldn't take a job on unless I knew it would bring me in at least ten grand, cash."

Ironsides's face broke into a broad smile of comprehension.

"There's a lot to that," he agreed. "In fencin' stuff me an' Milky run up against a lotta cheap guys, an' it's surprisin' what they lug off an' want us to take. I've thought a lot of times what saps they are. Now, you—why, I'd say you're what I'd call a—a——"

Ironsides hesitated, stopped, for want of a vocabulary sufficient to express his idea.

"A magnificent thief," supplied The Duke with a smile. "That's the word you want."

"That's it," declared Ironsides. "That's sure the word. Magnificent thief. That's you."

"You bet I am!" said The Duke, much pleased with himself. "If I do say it myself, I'm just that—a magnificent thief. I do things on a big scale, which is why I'm not in jail and always have money to spend, while poor old Tip was always broke even when he was out."

"I'm for your style," said Milky admiringly. "Give me the guys who cart in the stuff in wholesale lots."

The Duke again leaned back, placed a neat shoe across his knee, and looked meditatively at the light of his cigaret.

"How's business, anyway?" he asked casually.

"Not so good," replied Ironsides. "Town's a little hot."

"Listen, you boys," said The Duke, lowering his voice. "I'm going to talk plain to you because I know you're square shooters. We've done business before and everybody made money. I want you to do some fencing for me on a job I have in prospect. It will run into important money."

Both Ironsides and Milky were all interest at once.

"What's the stuff?" asked Ironsides.

"Got any connections where you can unload diamonds?" asked The Duke, by way of reply.

"Plenty," said Ironsides. "How much?"

"Oh, perhaps around fifty thousand," replied The Duke airily. "I want forty per cent."

Milky Katz whistled.

"We kin get plenty at twenty," said Milky. "An' don't forget that a big split goes higher up. This gets cut all the way up. We couldn't do nothin' by ourselves."

"That's your problem," declared The Duke. "As a suggestion, I might say that you could undertake this on your own and keep the profit instead of passing it to the Big Guy. Nobody will know who pulled this job except yourselves, and unset rocks are not so hard to handle as you fences make out."

IRONSIDES and Milky protested that they might be invited to take a ride if the Big Guy heard of such duplicity. The Duke knew this was true, and after an argument reduced his terms to one-third if it were paid spot cash upon valuation. He held there.

"Take it or leave it," he invited the two. "That's final."

"We take it," snapped Ironsides, "provided the stuff runs as high as thirty grand an' not too big. If it's easy to handle, Milky an' me will come out with a good day's pay, an' the Big Guy can have his usual split."

At this surrender The Duke held up his hand to a waiter.

"Let's have another bottle," the magnificent thief ordered. "No bootleg. Understand?"

Under the stimulation of the second bottle and the recalling of old times, The Duke expanded and grew highly confidential with his old friends.

"I don't mind telling you that in a day or two hell's going to break loose," confided The Duke. "And you can bet your split, Ironsides, that when I get through you'll think I'm a more magnificent thief than ever before. I'm figuring on two big-shot jobs inside of ten minutes—big ones."

Both Ironsides and Milky, hardened to audacious schemes, gasped at this plan to perpetrate two outstanding crimes in such a brief space of time.

"You'll wind up in stir," growled Ironsides.

The Duke laughed lightly.

"Listen, you two wise guys," he said, leaning over the table and speaking in low tones. "Up on the eighth floor of the Midway Building are a couple of fellows wholesaling diamonds. Good rocks, too. I rented a room across the hall from them, and I've been watching them close. Right now I've rigged up a plan to knock them over, and it's a pipe. After I do that little trick I drop down in an elevator to the first floor, slip in the rotunda side-door of the Midway Bank just as it opens, stick up a teller, and I'm off with a pocket full of kale and rocks. I step out the side door again, cross the hall, go in the side door of a cigar store there, and later drift out on the street while the excitement is on. Maybe I'll even mix with the crowds and gawk around a while."

Ironsides and Milky were almost dumfounded at the audacity of the plan, but they admitted that if it were well thought out and properly executed, it would work perfectly.

"I'll say you're a—a real magnificent thief," spluttered Ironsides. "How much you figger to clean up?"

"I hope to get fifty thousand in diamonds and about ten thousand in cash from the bank," said The Duke modestly. "Now, how does that stack up against Tip's measly grand? The risk's no greater, so far as going to the pen is concerned. Tip gets five to life for burglary. I'd get seven to life for first degree robbery. Besides, if I'm nabbed, which won't happen, I go up in a blaze of glory—lots of publicity as the magnificent thief, as Ironsides puts it—and there's some satisfaction in that, to know that you're not rated as a cheap skate by the bulls and the public. I'd rather go up for a million-dollar robbery than a hundred-dollar one any day."

The three drank to the success of The Duke's glorious plans and separated.

IT WAS the next morning that The Duke suddenly decided to put his plans into effect. From his post across the hall he had observed precautions being taken by the diamond dealers that indicated they had received a large consignment of jewels. By careful observation and a previous visit to the diamond dealers, ostensibly to make a purchase, he had a fair idea of the situation. In the entrance room was a wicket division that barred progress, and behind that a second room wherein he was certain the diamonds were kept. Seldom, if ever, did the diamond dealers have visitors before ten o'clock in the morning.

HAVING watched the place from the hour the door was opened, The Duke was certain that he would catch the two men alone. He walked boldly into the room, and as one of the men stepped to the wicket, he presented his automatic pistol. A second pistol he kept in his coat pocket for emergency use.

"Hands up!" snarled The Duke.

The man's hands went up. The second man made a quick movement, evidently reaching for a weapon, but The Duke brought his second gun into play.

"You back there," he called to the second man. "Hoist your hands."

Seeing that he was too late, the second man obeyed.

"Turn around and face the wall, both of you," ordered the bandit.

Both men did as The Duke commanded, with their hands in the air.

The Duke pocketed one of his weapons, stepped swiftly to the small gate, entered it, and approached his victims.

"March into the next room," he ordered.

Inside the second room, The Duke commanded one of the men to open the large safe there. The command was obeyed, and the man dragged out several trays of uncut diamonds.

Again ordering the two men to stand facing the wall, with their hands over their heads, the bandit scooped the diamonds into a small sack. Some were loose, others were wrapped in diamond papers, but the bandit did not wait to unwrap them. However, he did stop long enough to tumble some of the jewels from diamond wallets, knowing that these would be particularly valuable stones.

HIS pleasant task of scooping up the sparkling wealth accomplished, The Duke turned to his victims.

"Stand right where you are for at least ten minutes," he ordered. "Don't take any chances and get away too quick. It may be I'll have to stop by the door, and if you move I'll sling a couple of slugs in your direction."

The Duke started moving cautiously backward toward the door with his pistol trained on the two men. Suddenly his heel caught on a rug, he slipped, danced on one foot for an instant in the effort to maintain his balance, and fell heavily. His pistol flew from his hand as he struck the floor.

Involuntarily one of the diamond dealers, a large man, turned his head at the crash, and, seeing the bandit prostrate, leaped for him. Before The Duke could recover sufficiently to put up a fight or draw his other weapon, the large man pounced upon him and pinned him to the floor. In another moment the second dealer had joined him and wrenched the sack of diamonds from the robber.

The smaller man then dashed for The Duke's pistol and leveled it at him. The Duke lay still. The larger man got up and dusted his knees, and the two dealers then stood and contemplated their prisoner.

"Well, Jim," said the small man, "we've got this guy safe. If he moves, I'll blow off his lousy head. You'd better ring up the police."

The man addressed as Jim moved toward a telephone in a corner, but stopped and came back.

"Suppose they'd send up a bird who might go looking into things?" dubiously suggested Jim.

At this the smaller man drew his brows down in thought.

"You're right," he said finally. "But what'll we do with this bird?"

The Duke gathered vaguely that the two were involved in certain diamond dealings that might not stand police inspection. He was confirmed in this view when the large man spoke up.

"Let's kick the bum out," he said. "We ain't got time to monkey around with police an' courts. Like as not if we call the cops they'll grab a lot of rocks an' hold 'em for evidence."

"I hate to do it," said the smaller man, "but I don't see no other way out. It's a cinch if we yell for coppers they'll——"

"Yes, they will," hastily agreed Jim.

The large man leaned down and jerked The Duke roughly to his feet.

"Look here, you skunk," snarled Jim, "beat it, see, an' if you ever come back we'll knock you stiffer'n a board. Skip!"

The Duke staggered to the door with the small man still keeping him covered with the pistol. He was given a shove, the door slammed, and the bandit heard it locked behind him.

FOR a moment The Duke stood outside, bewildered at the magnitude and suddenness of his failure. Rage succeeded bewilderment, and he reached into his coat pocket for his second pistol, which the two diamond dealers had not found in their haste to get rid of him. The Duke had the fell design, born of anger, to kick in the door and hold up the diamond dealers again. No, that wouldn't do. It wasn't in keeping with the way he worked. The men behind the door would shoot him down, probably were lying in wait for him to attempt something like that.

The baffled bandit walked down the hallway and cooled off somewhat. Merely an accident, he reflected, that caused him to fail. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes past ten. He had planned to perpetrate the diamond robbery at ten minutes to ten and reach the bank as it opened at ten o'clock. However, it wasn't too late for the bank robbery.

Considerably ruffled, but still determined to continue his rôle as the magnificent thief, The Duke caught a down elevator and alighted on the main floor. Hand on gun in his pocket and with his hat pulled low over his eyes, he stalked into the bank by the side door. He walked up to a window, poked his wicked-looking automatic pistol at the teller, and said in a low, cool voice:

"Don't let out a yip. Rake up all the loose cash and pass it out."

The bank teller gave a startled grunt and began to obey. He passed out a handful of bills.

"More," growled The Duke. "These are only fives. Give me those bundles over there. Snap it up."

THE teller accommodatingly, even hastily, obeyed the order. The Duke stuffed a couple of bundles of money into his pocket with his left hand, reached for more, and at that moment a hand was clapped upon his shoulder, while another grasped his gun hand and wrenched the weapon from him.

The Duke looked up into the face of a towering bank guard.

"There's a gun at your back," said the guard quietly, and poked him to show that he was not lying. "March quietly to your left through that door you see there, or I'll blow you wide open."

The Duke marched as instructed. So quietly had the attempted robbery and capture been carried out that little excitement was caused by the two men. One or two customers looked curiously at the two and then went about their business. The teller hastily shut up his cage.

THE guard poked his prisoner with the gun again, and pushed him into a small private office occupied by a gray-haired man.

"Caught this bird in the act of holding up a teller, Mr. Watkins," said the guard proudly.

Mr. Watkins, the gray-haired occupant of the office, arose from his chair in astonishment.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "Good work, my boy! I didn't hear any excitement out there."

"Wasn't a bit," explained the guard. "Hardly anybody noticed anything unusual was goin' on."

"That's fine," exclaimed Mr. Watkins. "Publicity in the nature of bank hold-ups is hard on business. How did you happen to get him so easily?"

The bank policeman's chest expanded at this praise.

"I been watchin' him several days," he said. "I see him a couple times out in the hallway by the door, snoopin', an' I'd figgered out he was up to something. To-day the minute he came in I see him jerk his hat down over his eyes, and I knew right then he was goin' to pull a stick-up, so I sneaked up right back of him. He's still got some of the money in his pocket."

The guard reached into The Duke's pocket, brought out two bundles of bills, and laid them on a desk. Then he systematically searched The Duke. He laid on the desk beside the bills The Duke's wallet, a note-book, a handful of small change, a knife, a watch, several cartridges, and other odds and ends. Having concluded this ceremony, he turned to the banker.

"Want me to call the police, Mr. Watkins?" he asked.

"I suppose we'll have to," said Mr. Watkins, "but I dislike doing it. It makes customers nervous when they read about such things, and we've always prided ourselves on never having had a hold-up. Yes, we'll have to turn him over to the police, but first let me go out and find that teller he robbed. He might try to turn in an alarm, and I'll stop him until we're ready."

Mr. Watkins stepped out of the small office into the bank. The big guard turned his head toward the door as the banker closed it, and in that instant The Duke swept a heavy ink well from the desk and cracked it against the guard's head. He caught the guard in his arms as he toppled, eased him without noise to the floor, grabbed his revolver, which he dropped into his own coat pocket, and hastily slipped out of the door.

The Duke was surprised at the lack of excitement in the bank, but he did not pause to make extended observations. Instead, he walked rapidly out of the side door, across the hallway of the building, and into the cigar store, as he had originally planned.

HE HAD expected to purchase a cigar in the store and loiter there for a few minutes, but as he stepped to the counter it flashed across his mind that he had no money—not even enough to buy a package of cigarets. His money was back on the vice-president's desk in the bank, and he had been in such haste to depart that he had forgotten to gather it up. Also he had left lying there two fat bundles of bank notes that he might as well have taken. Fervent but silent curses welled up in The Duke.

Such reflections, however, did him no good now. Well, he had been unlucky, exceedingly unlucky, and he needed a few dollars' change for immediate use. He might have to take a taxicab within the next few minutes.

The cigar store was empty of customers. One man was there, back of the counter, looking at him inquiringly. The Duke whipped out the bank guard's revolver and presented the muzzle to the man's chest.

"Stand right still, brother, until I empty that bell-box," he ordered. "I need a little piece of change and might as well get it here."

The Duke walked around with his back to the window to prevent passers-by from seeing his revolver.

"Snap open that cash-drawer," he ordered the man, who hastily obeyed.

AT SIGHT of the cash-drawer The Duke's eyes glinted with anger. In the drawer were two half-dollars, a dollar bill, a half-dollar in dimes, three quarters, and about a dozen nickels.

"Where's your cash?" snarled The Duke.

"That's — that's all there is," quavered the frightened tobacconist. "Just before the bank opened I had to pay a bill for sixty dollars, and the fellow wanted cash. I was getting ready to go across to the bank when you——"

"Shut up," commanded The Duke, and, scooping out the money, he shoved it into his pocket.

And at that moment, for the second time that day, a hand reached over his shoulder and his gun-hand was caught as in a vise and wrenched upward. An instant later he was whirled around and beheld himself in the grip of a large, uniformed policeman.

"Caught in the act," said the officer with a satisfied air, and pocketed the revolver. He patted The Duke's pockets and felt under his shoulder to see if he had another weapon.

"Fine thing I dropped in this morning," said the pleased patrolman to the cigar man. "Bud, call the police station and have 'em send up a wagon. I'll take this bird down myself."

THE Duke sat haughtily in the wagon until his arrival at the station, where he was booked. The officer who had made the capture then marched him over to the detective bureau to have him questioned and his possible record looked up. The head of the robbery squad took him in hand.

The Duke answered questions briefly, though politely.

"What made you pull that robbery?" asked the robbery-squad chief. "Broke and hungry, huh?—though your clothes don't look it."

At this insult The Duke's face grew fiery red.

"Broke?" he snorted. "Hell, no, I wasn't broke! Say, five minutes before I pulled that job I had almost a grand—almost a thousand dollars in my pocket."

"Then you don't deny that stick-up?" asked the lieutenant.

""How can I?" asked The Duke simply. "The copper caught me. I'll have to do the best I can—cop a plea."

"I still don't understand why a swell-looking guy like you pulled that hold-up," said the lieutenant.

The Duke's anger flared again.

"Say, listen here," he answered hotly, "not over an hour ago I held up Robinson & Fink, a couple of diamond dealers in the Midway Building. If you don't believe it, call 'em up."

"Is that so?" said the surprised lieutenant. "We'll see about that."

THE lieutenant turned the leaves of a telephone-book, found a number, and called it. A brief conversation over the telephone ensued.

"Say," said the lieutenant, "were you held up this morning? . . . Not stuck up, hey? . . . Just kicked a bum out? . . . All right. This is the police station. . . . All right. Thanks."

He turned back to The Duke.

"Say, you big bum," said the lieutenant, with an evil glint in his eye, "what do you mean, giving me a steer like that? They said they'd kicked out a guy who was hanging around."

"They just don't want to tell about it," said The Duke. "It happened I dropped the rocks on the way out, so they think they'll keep it quiet. You ought to look them up because they're doing something phony."

The astonished lieutenant regarded The Duke through narrowed eyelids.

"What's your game?" he demanded.

Again The Duke's vanity was touched and his anger flared.

"Take a tip from me and I'll open your eyes," he said earnestly. "I stuck up the Midway Bank this morning. I grabbed a bunch of money, got caught, swatted the bank cop, and made my getaway. How's that for action? Call 'em up and they'll tell you about it. Maybe I'll swing for it, because I cracked that bank bull a bad wallop. I'm surprised they haven't reported it already. What do you think about that?"

Again the lieutenant looked suspiciously at his prisoner. Then he turned once more to his telephone book.

"I'll call up and see," he said.

There took place another conversation over the telephone. At its conclusion the lieutenant again turned to The Duke.

"You damn' faker!" growled the officer. "What're you trying to do, make me think you're one of these confessing nuts and have me send you over to the psychopathic ward? If that's your game, you're off."

"What did the bank say?" demanded The Duke, bristling.

"They said you were a liar," replied the lieutenant. "They said the bank cop had a fight with a bum who was hanging around, and got hit on the head, but he's all right. They said no money was stolen and they didn't think the incident was worth reporting."

"Say, they're stringing you!" roared The Duke in his anger. "They think it'll scare customers to have the papers tell about a big stick-up there."

"What's your next fairy tale?" demanded the lieutenant. "Wasn't you the guy who held up and robbed John D. of a million dollars cash?"

The Duke glared at his captor.

"Lock him up," ordered the lieutenant.

IT WAS two weeks after The Duke's arrest that Ironsides Donnelly dropped into Jerry the bootblack's outlaw barroom, and found Milky Katz seated before a bottle of liquor. Milky greeted his friend with a smile.

"Where you been?" asked Ironsides, seating himself.

"Oh, out on business for a few days," replied Milky. "Have a drink. Good stuff."

The two took a drink and talked of this and that for a few minutes.

"By the way," asked Milky, "what become of our friend, The Duke? I ain't read nothin' about any big diamond or bank stick-ups, an' I been watchin' the papers careful. He oughta be pullin' his stuff pretty soon if he's goin' to."

"It's funny about The Duke," said Ironsides seriously. "He dropped plumb outa sight, an' two days ago I was lookin' through a paper an' I find this under a little, one-line head."

Ironsides fumbled in a pocket and drew out a newspaper clipping.

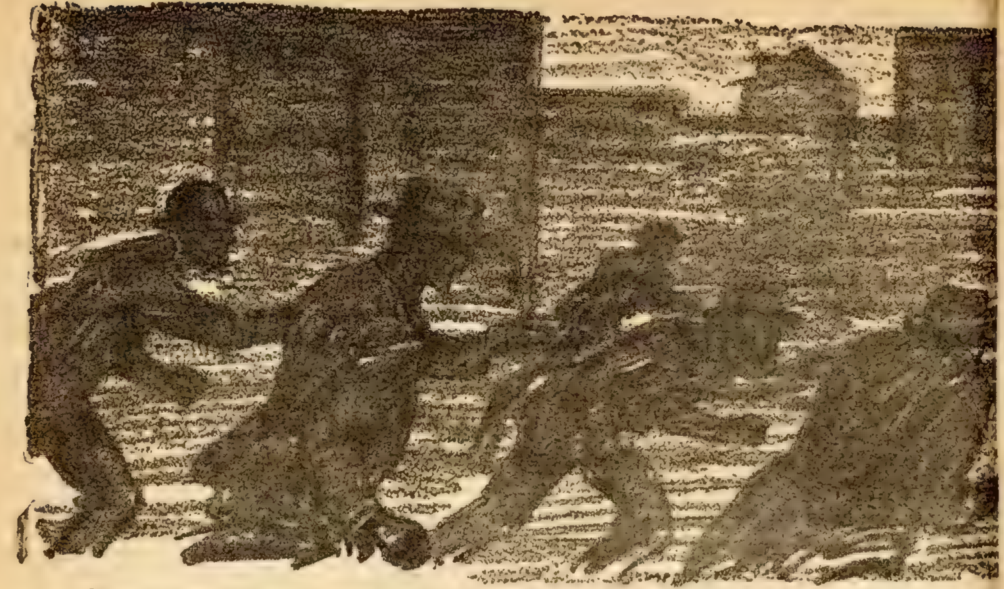
"It says here: 'Pleads Guilty,' an' then it goes on to say:

> Chester Willard today pleaded guilty in superior court to holding up the Midway Cigar Store and was sentenced to the regulation indeterminate term of seven years to life in the penitentiary. The charge was first degree robbery. He was captured in the act by a patrolman. Willard obtained $3.85 in the robbery.

Ironsides flipped the clipping onto the table and looked quizzically at Milky Katz.

"Funny!" said Milky. "He was the guy who was gonna knock over fifty grand in diamonds an' stick up a bank, all in ten minutes, an' if he got caught get a big play in the papers."

"Yeah," said Ironsides; "'tis funny. He thought a guy was dumb who went after less'n ten grand, cash. Haw! Haw! Three dollars an' eighty-five cents, an' he called hisself a magnificent thief!"



People were running like animals, their glaring eyes fixed upon the horse.

The Man-Wolves

By MURRAY LEINSTER

A TWO-PART STORY—PART 1

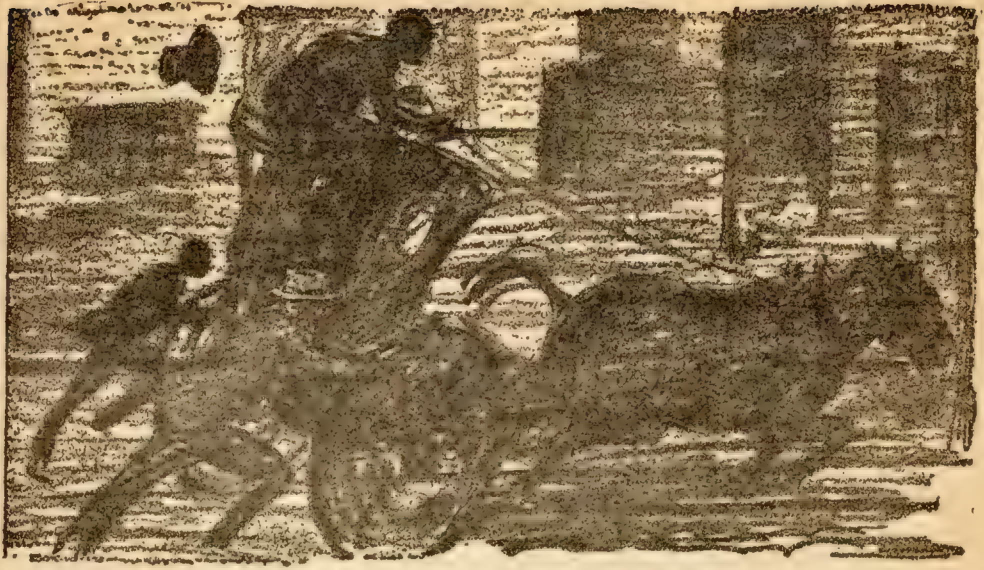
Dark forms slipped furtively through deserted streets; eerie, frightful sounds were heard, such as should not have come from any human throat; and New York of the Twentieth Century became a city of horror overnight.

CHAPTER I

THE BEAST-THINGS

THE cab which was nearly the sole survivor of all the horse-drawn cabs in New York waited patiently before the brownstone stoop. Perhaps half a block away an arc-light cast a pale-bluish light upon the empty street. A long distance to the west there was a dull rumbling noise, which was a late elevated train growling its way up-town.

The cabby yawned and coiled his whip. A single light showed in the house before which he waited, but there was no other sign of life anywhere. The lateness of the hour was shown alike by the complete absence of any other traffic, and by



a dismal row of ash-cans awaiting the before-sunrise collection.

A man turned into the street from the next corner, passing under the full glare of the arc-light. He wore a soft hat, a light-weight overcoat that flapped carelessly about him, and there was a cane swirling from the crook of his arm. The cabby noted a silk scarf about his collar, and the fugitive gleam of a white shirt-front. It was part of the cabby's trade to spot prospective customers a long distance off.

The man came down the block, swinging his cane casually. The cabby examined him as a possible fare, if he should be dismissed here.

THE door of the house opened and the cabby's late fare came out, waving a bill. Later on, the driver was able to describe this man only as a small gentleman with a soft hat and black whiskers, neatly trimmed into a professional imperial. He thought the gentleman was foreign—Chinese or Japanese or something.

"I won't need you again, after all," said the fare in perfect English.

He slipped two bills into the cabby's hand. The cabby saw that the top bill was a five, and tipped his hat.

"Thank you, sir," he said.

He gathered up his reins to drive on. The young man was nearly abreast of the cab when the late fare turned back. It seemed to the cabby that the young man started suddenly, as if surprised, when the man with the black whiskers passed before him.

The older man went on into the house, and the door closed behind him with a gentle, decisive click.

The young man took half a dozen steps, paused, and halted, as if bewildered.

"Keb, sir?" said the cabby.

The young man ran his eyes over the vehicle, rather dazedly.

"No. I live near here." He raised his hand, still bewildered, as the cabby was about to drive on. "Wait a minute."

He was staring at the horse, strangely, fixedly. The light from the distant arc-light showed enough of his face for the cabby to see in it sheer bewilderment struggling with some strange new expression.

THE cabby waited. The horse dozed. The young man looked at the horse. A surface car clattered across the street four blocks away. Somewhere a distant taxi honked discordantly. There was no other sound.

"If you don't want the keb, sir——" said the cabby patiently.

The young man made no answer. Sweat—the cabby saw it—was standing out on his face. The cabby was a reasonable man, but the young man gave indications of being in that peculiar and rather awful stage of intoxication when a man acts soberly, and talks soberly, and then suddenly and without warning goes off into the horrors. The expression on his face frightened the cabby a little, now that he looked at it closely.

The cabby shook his reins, and the horse moved off at a leisurely walk. The cabby settled back in his seat, reflecting comfortably upon the evils of prohibition, the folly of youth, and kindred subjects.

The cab reached the arc-light and passed it. Then the cabby became aware that the young man was following on the sidewalk. He drove over toward the curb again.

"Keb, sir?"

The young man made no reply. He was staring fixedly at the horse. When the cab stopped, he stopped, watching it. The cabby saw his eyes then. They were wide and intent—and not quite human.

"Giddap!" said the cabby, a trifle hoarsely.

He shivered a little. The horse kept to the middle of the street. The cabby began to think uneasily of a policeman.

He looked around. The young man was still coming on, keeping just a little behind the cab. The cabby saw a lurking shadow behind him. He watched and saw that it was another man, also watching the horse. There was something horribly furtive about this second man. A little later the cabby glanced to his left. There were three people, two men and a woman, following on the sidewalk, watching the horse with a strange, incredible intensity. The street was completely silent except for the thumping hoof-beats of the horse. The cabby noted suddenly that the five people who were following the cab were moving utterly without sound. There was something odd about their gait.

THE cabby felt the hair prickle at the back of his neck. This thing was unreasonable. It was nightmarish. It was terrifying. But there was nothing tangible to get excited about. The cabby's throat, however, was unexpectedly dry, and he suddenly turned off his course and headed down a side street. The distant colored light of a traffic-control station gleamed three blocks away.

After turning he looked hopefully behind him to see if he were alone again. For a few moments he saw nothing. Then a dark figure, its eyes fixed on the horse, slipped into view. Another. Another. The cabby counted not five but nine people following him noiselessly, all looking at the horse. Their footfalls made no sound. There were at least two women among the figures that slunk along in the shadows of the ultra-respectable houses on either hand. This was a quiet and conservative neighborhood. The houses were soberly but well built. Here and there gleamed an arc-light. Rather more rarely there was a lighted window in the snug dwellings on either side of the street. Ahead, where the changing light of the traffic-control station showed, a motor-car purred past now and then. But there were figures following the horse-drawn cab in utter silence, without even the whisper of shoe-soles upon the pavement. The cabby, with the hair standing erect upon his head, thought he heard soft panting breaths.

Some paralysis of terror kept him from whipping up his horse and dashing away at top speed. He drove on in apparent somnolence, his head sunk on his breast as if dozing on the box. But the whites of his eyes showed plainly as he glanced affrightedly from side to side.

He could have sobbed with relief when the cab pulled out into the brightly-lighted park square, with the rumble of a distant subway train coming vaguely up from below, its twin surface-car tracks, and a cream-and-black taxi, glittering with a varied assortment of little colored lights, easing to a bored stop and darting forward again when the traffic officer gave it the "Go" signal.

THE cabby drew up alongside the traffic station. The uniformed policeman inside was painstakingly giving some directions to an inquiring civilian, a man with thick-lensed spectacles and a straggly, discouraged mustache. The cabby shivered on his box, but felt that peculiar security which the civilian generally does feel in the presence of a uniform. He glanced timidly behind the cab.

There were more people on the street behind him than was usual at this hour. There were eight—nine—nearly a dozen of them. Quite a little crowd. But they were paying no attention to the horse at all. Some were turning north and some south, and one or two seemed to be waiting for a surface-car. They had all come out of the street from which the cab had come, but they were ignoring it.

The cabby's jaw dropped. The traffic officer ended his instructions by pointing and came out of his little cubby-hole.

"Well?"

The cabby stared at the oblivious people behind him. There was the young man with the light overcoat and the soft hat and the stiff shirt-front. He was walking north, his cane swinging jauntily from the crook of his arm. There was a woman with a man who was obviously her escort waiting until a surface car should turn up.

"Well?" repeated the traffic officer impatiently.

The cabby swallowed. He began to think he had dreamed it all. He realized thoroughly that to tell his story would be to convict himself of insanity. He had no story to tell! He'd thought people were following him. They weren't. To tell the cop that——

"I—I thought," said the cabby, his eyes strained, "that maybe this gen'leman would want a keb."

The civilian with the thick-lensed spectacles shook his head. The cabby clucked to his horse. That ancient animal started on ahead across the brightly lighted way. The cabby turned to look behind him again. His eyes were arrested by the civilian at the traffic station. The man with the straggling mustache and thick spectacles was staring at the horse, fascinated. The cabby saw him lick his lips. His eyes were wide and intent—and not quite human.

The cabby's whip descended upon the back of his astonished animal. The horse bounded ahead, drawing the rattle-trap cab behind it. The cabby was sweating now in unreasonable and totally irrational panic. His eyes were wild as he swung in his seat to gaze terrifiedly to the rear before the empty, dark street ahead of him should swallow him up.

The man and the woman who had seemed to be waiting for a surface car were crossing the street now. And several people who had started north or south had changed their minds. They were hurriedly moving over the smooth asphalt. A lean, dark-faced man swung into the side-street behind the cab.

A block from the bright avenue it passed an arc-light. The cabby, staring with a white and frightened face, saw the dark-featured man flash into the area of light and across it. He was running furtively after the cab. He was padding along silently, curiously crouched. Two seconds later other figures came padding after the first. Men and women. There was a glint of light upon a pair of spectacles. It was the man who had been talking to the traffic policeman!

The cabby gasped. His terror was entirely nightmarish now. It had no basis of reason. Here were people running noiselessly, like animals, panting like animals, their eyes hot and glaring and fixed upon the horse that drew the antiquated cab. They seemed to be gaining upon the cab. They *were* gaining upon it.

The cabby stood up in his box, wielding his lash in sweating panic. Dark, respectable houses flashed by on either side. There was no traffic other than the panic-stricken cab fleeing horribly, and the silent, panting, glaring group of human beings racing in beastly fashion after it.

Suddenly, above the panting, a sound arose. It was something like a yelp, broken off short as if something not quite a beast had remembered it was a man. The cabby's spine turned to ice. The sound began again, and this time it was not broken off. It was a long, eerie, horrible howl from one of the beast-things panting after the cab.

The running things deserted the sidewalks. They sped out upon the pavement. As the chase went on toward the west, a padding, running figure drew alongside the vehicle. It came on, until it was even with the horse. There it leaped and bounded in a horrible fashion, snarling like a beast at the poor animal. It dashed in, snatching at the reins, and leaped out again. Behind it came an ululating howl. The bouncing, leaping figure in the lead howled back, emitting a sound that should never at all have come from any human throat. The cabby, in stark panic, lashed at it with his whip. It snarled at him in totally unhuman tones and leaped in again at the horse's head. It caught the reins.

The horse checked, trembling. It reared up as the cabby flogged it mercilessly. Then the other padding things came racing up. With growls and snarls they flung themselves upon the horse. The animal screamed once . . .

The noises that came from the swarming mass of two-legged things above the fallen horse snapped something in the cabby's brain. He too began to scream in utter panic, beating and flailing at the air with his whip. And he did not stop screaming when whistles shrilled a little distance away, and the things that had been making beast-noises above the horse fled suddenly and left him alone in his cab with a carcass between the shafts, rather horribly torn, and with the smell of warm blood mingling with the night-smell of a city street.

CHAPTER II

THE DARK, WET STAIN

TWO hours later the after-theater cars had been sorting themselves out bewilderingly at Columbus Circle and shooting here and there with glittering lights; some through the Park, and some up Broadway, and a few east along Fifty-ninth Street to Fifth Avenue and Madison.

At that time a bell-boy came out of the basement of a certain tall hotel that overlooks the Park. He had a large, lop-eared, and generally unattractive dog on a leash.

He lit a cigaret, swore genially at the dog, and crossed to the Park entrance when the traffic permitted. Once within it, he strolled cheerfully along with the lop-eared dog tugging at the leash to investigate occasional dropped cigaret-butts, fragments of lunch-paper that had escaped the park cleaners, and other odds and ends of interest to dogs.

The night was only pleasantly cool. The bell-boy strolled peacefully, smoking his cigaret and thinking obscurely of such matters as interest bell-boys.

He passed a man sitting on a bench. The man's head turned to look at the dog. His eyes seemed to become fixed on the animal. He stared at it unblinkingly as the bell-boy permitted it to lead him past. The dog and its guardian were perhaps ten feet beyond the bench when the boy heard the man stand up, shuffle his feet as if hesitating, and then walk behind them.

A moment later a singularly thick and strained voice said:

"That's a nice dog."

The bell-boy glanced over his shoulder. The man from the bench was staring at the dog with a peculiarly intense gaze. His eyes were wide and intent — and not quite human.

"Yeah," said the bell-boy reservedly. "He's all right. But I ain't no dog expert. If y' want to talk dogs, y' got to find somebody else."

THE man did not reply. He was staring at the lop-eared, ungainly animal. The bell-boy noticed that he was walking in a very peculiar fashion—rather slinkily.

The path branched. Two other men, talking in a conversational tone, were just coming out of the other branch. They fell silent, watching the dog in the dusky semi-darkness. Neither of them spoke after catching sight of the dog. The bell-boy, with a curious tingling along his spine, felt them turn to follow, watching.

The boy felt uneasy. Not too many lights here. He dragged the dog toward a brighter path. A drinking - fountain stood there. A roadster — an expensive one — had stopped near it, and a young man in evening clothes was helping a girl to alight.

"If you have never tasted *aqua pura* under strictly sanitary conditions——" he was saying, as if very much amused.

But he broke off when he saw the dog. He stared at it. The girl gazed at it. The bell-boy heard her say something, throatily.

"That—that dog——" Then she gasped. "I—I want to go away!"

She put her hand across her eyes and climbed blindly back into the car. The bell-boy thought he heard her sobbing oddly, as if she were trembling all over.

But the young man did not climb back into the car with her. Bareheaded and top-coatless, he stared at the dog. Distinctly uneasy, and tempted to be scared, the boy passed on. The young man in evening clothes began to walk behind him, at first slowly, and then with the same slinking, padding steps as the others.

THEY passed another man who halted as the dog came abreast of him. As if fascinated, he retraced his steps. The boy heard pantings from the furtive group of men behind him. He heard a queer slobbering sound. Then a strange, half-strangled yelp. It came from one of the men.

The bell-boy began to run. His hair was standing straight up on his head. He heard padding footsteps behind him, also running. The dog, at first delighted to stretch its legs, suddenly scented something which it wished to investigate and stopped abruptly. The bell-boy gave one yank at the leash. An eerie, horrible howl went up, such as should not come from any human throat. The boy let go of the leash and fled.

Behind him he heard a ghastly tumult. The dog barked and yelped—then screamed all at once. There followed snarlings and growlings, unspeakably bestial.

When the bell-boy, babbling, came back a few minutes later with a skeptical and hard-boiled policeman, there was a dark, wet stain on the graveled path where he had left the dog. There was part of the leash. There was a fragment of a dog's hide, tramplled and draggled in the dark stain. There was nothing else.

CHAPTER III

WONG FLEES FOR HIS LIFE

A LITTLE more than three hours later, a small and dapper Chinese ran frantically into the police headquarters of the —th precinct. He was white as death beneath his oriental pigmentation, and sweat ran off of him in streams. Outside the police station there was a curious, muffled, beastly murmur, which soon died away. Two or three minutes later, while the little Chinese still gasped in his terror, there came a wailing, animal-like howl perhaps half a block away. It was a sound that never, never should have come from a human throat.

The man, nearly in a state of collapse, gave his name as Albert Wong, a servant to one Thomas Carruthers, Esq., of a certain tall hotel overlooking Central Park. He told the entirely incredible tale of having people stop to look at him as he went by and of finding that they were following him. After that every person he passed joined in the padding pack that came after him, until he felt as if he were being pursued by wild beasts. Their eyes, he said, burned as they looked at him. They began to pant and make slobbering noises with their mouths. Then, suddenly, one yelped like a wild thing, and the mob broke into a run, snarling and snapping like a wolf-pack. They had nearly caught him before he dashed into the police-station.

Albert Wong told his tale, for all his discomposure, in lucid, if accented, English. But he was locked up as being probably full of hop, though a doctor could find no sign of drug addiction about him. Albert Wong, however, would probably have had a bad time of it if the official police reports the next morning had not carried the accounts of the killing of a horse and the utter destruction of a dog in Central Park, by well-dressed, apparently respectable people who seemed suddenly possessed by a desire to form themselves into packs and run down living prey in precisely the fashion of wolves.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN FROM MONGOLIA

THESE three incidents all received the attention of the police. Of course. And the police investigated skeptically, and found that nothing was known of the foreign gentleman in the house which the cabby pointed out, and that nothing was known of any of the people who had run in the packs. They found absolutely nothing excepting a dead horse upon an ultra-respectable street in the west Eighties, a dark, wet, horrible stain upon a graveled walk in Central Park, and three reputable citizens who had seen a group of human beings running after Albert Wong. The reputable citizens affirmed that the running men had been of all ages and apparently of all strata of society; that they had been running with staring, fixed eyes and wide-open mouths, and that they panted and made horrible beast-noises as they ran.

The newspapers, after a certain amount of preliminary skepticism, played up the nearly concurrent events according to their several editorial policies. *The World* gave a vivid and rather well-written account of the chases and admitted the mysterious nature of their causes. It suggested a contagious aberration among drug-addicts. *The Times* rather distastefully summarized the stories as "apparently well-authenticated reports." And *Variety*, the theatrical paper with a publication-date which fitted into the time of the occurrences, hinted that it was an advance publicity stunt for a German film, and waxed cynical about its effect upon the box-office. The tabloids, however, fairly frothed at the type-font.

The first accounts appeared in the late morning issues, were expanded in the noon editions, and all three tabloids brought out extras during the afternoon with particularly hectic headlines and composite photographs. They recounted a report that two children in the Bronx had been precariously rescued from human wolf-packs. And this, of course, produced no less than six panics during the afternoon, in at least one of which the long-distance runners who daily pant their way about the Central Park reservoir were the central figures.

THE police investigation drew a blank. Not one of the men and women who had taken part in any of the three chases was located. A subway guard reported, indeed, that a man had ridden in a nearly empty coach to One Hundred and Fifty-Fifth Street with blood on his face. He had spent most of his time wiping it off and explained that his nose had been bleeding, and had tipped the guard half a dollar for an extra handkerchief. There was no trace of him after he left the subway. The official search for persons concerned in the three affairs got nowhere at all.

But a promising lead was turned up quite casually and accidentally in the Travelers' Club. It was discovered by one Jerry Carruthers, the youngest and most junior member of an impressive legal firm down-town.

He had dined at the club with the Senior Member of the firm, which was Middleton, Towne, Harper & Black. The dinner, like the club, was very quiet, very subdued, and very perfect. The Senior Member was impressive and — Jerry thought privately — rather vacuous. He had invited Jerry to dinner, and then did not know what to talk to him about. Jerry was rather resentfully aware that his admission to the firm had been over the Senior Member's protest, and had been arranged largely because of his uncle's insistence and because his uncle had put up the cash. The elder Carruthers was one of the principal clients of the firm.

Jerry welcomed the intrusion when a Mr. Grahame brought a stranger over to the table and introduced him.

"You'll want to meet Blakelock," said Grahame. "He's got the answer to this wolf-pack business. He just told it to me."

Blakelock demurred politely. He was lean and spare and deeply tanned, as if by a fiercer sun than that which shines upon New York. But his dinner-jacket set accustomedly upon his shoulders, and he seemed oblivious to the magnificence of the Travelers' Club.

"Not at all," he protested without interest. "I just said that I'd seen something like it in the East. In fact"—he smiled faintly—"I nearly ran in one of the packs myself. I think it was intended that I should."

"Sit down, sir," said the Senior Member pompously. "I saw an account of the matter in *The Times*. It interested me, though I thought it impossible. I should be glad to hear your story."

BLAKELOCK made no motion to seat himself.

"It's no story," he said with a great deal of reserve. "In fact, I'd rather not talk about it." He hesitated, then smiled with a shade of grimness. "I've been called a liar often enough. Quite politely, of course. But quite often enough." He shrugged and turned to Jerry. "I asked Grahame to tell me a good show to see, and he said he wasn't an authority, but that he would ask you."

He had thrust aside the original subject with pleasant finality.

"I'm just in town," he added, "and I want a show with lots of girls and some really good music. What is the best?"

Jerry hesitated.

"There's 'Don't Tell Father,'" he suggested uncomfortably. "The plot isn't much, but the chorus is pretty and the music's fair. The only trouble is that even the agencies haven't seats except for a couple of weeks ahead."

"I'll get them," said Blakelock. There was no over-confidence in his tone, merely a casual assurance. "And where is a good place to go afterwards? I hate to impose on you, but I just got here to-day."

"Why——" Jerry glanced uneasily at the Senior Member, who made no sign. He took the plunge. "Why not join us? I think you'd find it more comfortable." He stopped, then added a trifle apologetically: "To be honest, Mr. Blakelock, my uncle is rather — er — concerned about this wolf-pack business. I'd like very much to ask you something about it. And I won't call you a liar."

Blakelock smiled a little.

"Oh, yes, you would! Why is your uncle concerned?"

"I can't say," said Jerry confusedly. "That is—well, the man that was chased is his Chinese servant. And the dog that was killed belonged to his sister, my aunt. And —er—he had a sort of arrangement with that cabman. He hated taxicabs. Every afternoon he took a drive through the park in that cab."

He was appalled at the change that came over Blakelock's face. It was as hard as flint and thoroughly grim. Then Blakelock shrugged.

"Under the circumstances, then,"

he said stiffly, "I'm afraid I'll have to decline your invitation. I prefer not to meddle in the matter at all." He hesitated and shrugged once more. "I might mention," he observed, "that in Mongolia the current belief is that water thrown on a man-wolf breaks the spell."

He looked from one to the other and smiled without any mirth.

"You see," he said pleasantly, "I have proved that you would think me a liar."

He turned and walked abruptly away from the table. Jerry half-started from his chair and looked appealingly at the Senior Member, whose expression indicated that he considered himself to have been listening to a lunatic.

"He does know something, sir," said Jerry anxiously. "My uncle said the same thing, and he's terrified. I think I'd better——"

"By all means," said the Senior Member distastefully. "My own opinion is that it is all insanity. But of course, if you feel that it will add to your uncle's peace of mind, you had better see what this man can tell you."

Jerry hurried away, leaving the Senior Member sitting very erect and entirely pompous at the table. The Senior Member regarded the world from beneath bushy white, superior eyebrows and presently withdrew with a vast dignity to the reading-room. There he selected an approved magazine of strictly professional interest and immersed himself in it until his usual time for leaving the club. He paused before going out of the door.

"Mr. Carruthers," he said pompously," my junior partner——?"

"He went out, sir," said the doorman. "With a Mr. Blakelock, sir. I think, sir, they went to the theater."

"Ah," said the Senior Member profoundly. He got into the waiting taxi and rode in impressive indignation to his home.

But Jerry's interest in Blakelock had not been exclusively that of an excuse to escape from the Senior Member's conversation. He had caught up with Blakelock as the latter was getting into his top-coat.

"I BEG your pardon," said Jerry, embarrassed, "but I'd be tremendously obliged to you——"

"If I'd risk my life advising your uncle?" asked Blakelock pleasantly. He took his stick and settled his hat on his head.

"I don't want to be discourteous, but I'd rather not. Particularly as I'd simply be called a crazy man. Really, Mr. Carruthers, when you know that so-called impossible things are facts, it is foolish to publish your knowledge. I've tried it. I know. I've told you all you can safely misunderstand."

Jerry flushed, the more deeply because he discovered that he was still tightly clutching a napkin from the dining-room.

"If you know that impossible things are facts," he said doggedly, "you may know impossible ways to fight them. My uncle——"

"Do you know what danger he's in?" asked Blakelock.

Jerry shook his head.

"Wise man, your uncle," said Blakelock dryly. "If he told any one, they'd lock him up as a maniac."

"He isn't mad," said Jerry. "He's as sane as I am. But he is terrified, and I know that whatever has frightened him is real, whether it's impossible or not."

Blakelock regarded the younger man half-smilingly for nearly a minute.

"I won't lift a finger," he said firmly, "to get myself involved. But

I'll risk being called a liar on two conditions."

"Name them," said Jerry.

"First, that if I tell you what I know, it sha'n't be reported to policemen or physicians or any busybodies who'll lock me up to examine into my sanity. Second, that my first evening in New York mustn't be spoiled. I'll talk to you after I've seen this show you praise so highly, and after I've had my fill of civilized amusement. Not before."

"Done," said Jerry. He hesitated. "But—is my uncle safe in the meantime?"

"Probably not," said Blakelock without interest. "But I'd say he hasn't been for some time. Suppose we see about those tickets."

When the two of them went down the steps of the club together and into the waiting taxi, Jerry noticed that Blakelock's expression was eager—just exactly the sort of eagerness that would fill a man who had been away from New York for a long time, and who was reveling in the sensation of return.

CHAPTER V

THE DRUG OF THE DEVIL-PRIESTS

"DON'T TELL FATHER!" rang up its curtain at eight-thirty. Blakelock sank back in his seat and drank in the trivial words and tinkling, catchy music with the avid enjoyment of a man who has been deprived of light things for a number of years.

At nine-fifteen a guest on the eleventh floor of a tall hotel overlooking Central Park telephoned angrily to the hotel office that there was some animal, probably a dog, sniffing and panting outside his door. The guest did not like dogs. He requested indignantly that the dog be captured and removed from the hallway.

Before the request could be complied with, one of the eleventh-floor housekeepers moved through the hallway with an emergency supply of linen that had been called for. She saw a guest in the hall acting very strangely. He walked past a certain door, staring at it as if fascinated. Another guest got out of an elevator and moved briskly to pass him. Instead of going by, however, the other guest stopped and also stared at the door. The two of them pressed close to it. The housekeeper became alarmed.

The first man was trembling with excitement. He was making strange noises in his throat. They burst out suddenly into an eerie, yelping howl. At the sound, the other man seemed to be thrown into a frenzy. He flung himself at the door, clawing and scratching at it.

The housekeeper screamed and then stood paralyzed, gazing—so she affirmed afterwards—at two men who she was sure were utter maniacs. The two turned and stared at her, snarling in a beastly fashion. And then some noise warned them. They turned and loped—"padding like dogs," the housekeeper said—down the hallway as the woman fainted dead away. She explained hysterically, afterwards, that she had never seen either of them before; but as she admitted that their faces were contorted into the most horrible grimaces while she saw them, her failure to recognize them could be understood.

WHEN she pointed out the door, and one of the house detectives knocked tentatively upon it, a voice inside asked who was there before the door opened. Then Albert Wong spread the door wide, smiling politely. The detective looked into the sitting-room of the suite occupied by Thomas Carruthers, Esq. The elder Carruthers was seated in an arm-chair with a revolver in his lap and two seltzer siphons by his elbow. He regarded the house detective grimly.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the detective. "Did you hear any funny noises just now, sir?"

"Did I hear noises!" repeated Carruthers scornfully. "I heard the devil of a racket! As if a kennel of mad dogs were loose! I was about to shoot through the door when they ran away."

"Yes, sir," said the house detective. He opened his mouth, closed it again, and then said weakly: "Very sorry, sir. Very sorry. I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Do," said Carruthers grimly.

He sat inscrutably still until the door closed again. Then he raised his hand and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I wasn't mistaken, then," he said, shuddering. "They're clever, Wong. Devilishly clever. I wondered if they'd remember they were men and knock."

He watched as the little Chinese locked and bolted the door.

"Lucky," he said in ghastly levity, "that wolves don't climb. There was a transom they might have tried."

Albert Wong, beady-eyed and immaculate in the proper garb of a gentleman's gentleman, shivered.

Carruthers poured a drink. Wong moved to serve him with a seltzer, but Carruthers waved him away.

"You understand, Wong," he observed with the same forced gaiety, "I don't distrust you. But it would be safest for you not to come too close. I have seen it happen very quickly."

"Yes, sar," said Wong.

He waited patiently at the other side of the room.

CHAPTER VI

THE STORY OF THE BLACK SHAMANS

BLAKELOCK took out a latchkey, inserted it, and opened the door. He waved Jerry inside, smiling.

"You've really no idea how much I've enjoyed myself," he said reminiscently. "I've lain awake at night, staring up at the stars with the noises and smells of a Mongol town coming up through the darkness, and dreamed dreams of the second row of a musical comedy, a supper-place afterward, and coming comfortably home to a place like this."

Jerry was gazing about him in frank curiosity. For the apartment of a man long absent, it was remarkable. Everything was arranged with the air of constant use and comfort that it usually takes months to get, even in lived-in quarters.

"This is yours?" he asked.

"Oh, no," said Blakelock carelessly. "I borrowed it from a chap I know. Passed him in Pekin, and he gave me his key and cabled to have it fixed up for me. He's hunting tigers in Korea."

A broad-faced, stunted man-servant appeared noiselessly and took Blakelock's coat. He nodded impassively when Blakelock spoke briefly in a language that sounded uncommonly barbarous to Jerry's ears. Then he vanished.

"That's Jagatai," observed Blakelock, sinking comfortably into a chair. "Pure Mongol. Name's the same as Genghis Khan's son who ruled in Samarkand. Jagatai believes motor-cars are run by devils in the engine, and he thinks we keep tame devils in the electric-light bulbs. Cheerful religion!"

He yawned, and Jagatai returned with a tray containing a seltzer siphon and little glasses in which ice glittered.

"Now," said Blakelock comfortably, "I suppose you want to talk about this man-wolf business."

"I want you to talk," protested Jerry. "I want to know what is threatening my uncle. He won't say. From what you've already told me, I suppose it's because he thinks he'd be considered insane if he did."

"He would be," said Blakelock calmly. "Right now, of course, you are tempted to believe that I know a great deal which flies in the face of all science, and which may be true in spite of that fact. But before you leave, you'll decide I'm romancing, or else you'll think I'm mad. For instance, my guess is that your uncle is in danger, in imminent danger, of being torn to shreds by men in exactly the state of mind of those who killed that horse and dog and chased that little Chinaman last night. I think that he is likely to be pulled down by a howling mob absolutely anywhere on earth that he may be; by a mob which might be composed of his dearest friends, who would go mad at sight of him."

JERRY stared.

"Go ahead," he said doubtfully.

Blakelock smiled.

"You doubt me already. I'll make a few more guesses. He's been in Mongolia at one time or another."

"You're right there. He organized the Mongolian Trading Company. He made a fortune out of it, though he's sold out his interest now."

Blakelock pursed his lips.

"He's that Carruthers! Then the thing does become clear. I know something about the Mongolian Trading Company. It sold a lot of guns to Baron Ungern, and Semenoff had its backing when he tried to make himself an emperor. He only lasted a few weeks, but they were profitable weeks for your uncle. Semenoff had stolen twenty millions in gold from Admiral Kolchak—the White Russian, you know, who was fighting the Bolsheviks—and the Mongolian Trading Company got several of them. But that's ancient history. Still, Carruthers isn't a name to conjure with in Mongolia."

"You mean my uncle——"

"Had enemies? Rather!" said Blakelock. "I wouldn't have the enemies he's got for all the money he took out of Mongolia. Peasants and traders are bad enough, but devil-priests and Chinese tongs are worse."

"I've noticed," said Jerry uncomfortably, "that he has always seemed cautious. And to some extent suspicious of strangers."

"With reason," observed Blakelock dryly. "Witness his present fix. The chances are he's had letters from—er—the Society of Infinite Benevolence."

"I wouldn't know that," said Jerry.

"No, I don't suppose you would. But, at a guess, his caution has increased markedly of late."

"He moved into town, into a suite in a hotel," said Jerry. "He had been living at his place up the Hudson."

Blakelock nodded.

"And he hasn't gone about much lately?"

"No. As I told you, he used to ride through Central Park in a horse-drawn cab every day. He owns several cars, but he dislikes them."

"He's become highly respectable and conservative," observed Blakelock with an air of amusement. "Well, it was his privilege."

"But what has this to do with——"

"Man-wolves? Everything." Blakelock knocked off his ash. "That affair isn't so mysterious, after all. I've heard half a dozen times, in half a dozen places, of man-wolves. Generally they're more or less harmless. There used to be a harmless variety in Mongolia. Magic, the natives considered it, but it was more or less an open secret.

"At certain seasons, especially at certain ages of the moon, there would be ceremonies presided over by a *shaman*—a sort of devil-priest. The devotees, after a lot of rigmarole, would drink a certain devilish drink made out of various unpleasant ingredients boiled together. A certain sort of small spider stewed in the beverage was probably the essential element. When the drink took effect, the worshipers would begin to howl like wolves and run about, snarling. They were generally convinced that they were wolves. And when the effects wore off they believed that they had been wolves for the time being, and were quite sure that they'd attended a satisfactory church service in praise of the devil."

"But do you mean——"

"That that stuff was drunk here in New York? I rather doubt it. There's an Indian tribe in South America—the Arucanians, I believe—who get quite a similar effect through a concoction they make out of some root or other. And an old Italian doctor I met once in Genoa told me of an affection he called *volpe*. The symptoms were exactly the same, as he described them, but he said that the malady was hereditary, that it affected only individuals, and that it appeared to be a sort of alleviated epilepsy.

"The Italian villagers, he told me, go out with pitchforks when they hear a *volpe* howling in the village. When they draw blood, the man recovers. Or if he finds a pool of water he goes and wallows in it and comes to himself. The wife of a man who's subject to *volpe* puts a pan of water by the bed. The attacks always come at night, and when he gets up, snarling, he splashes in the water and the attack is averted."

"But I don't see——"

"How these items apply to your uncle? They don't, exactly. They just show that—er—lycanthropic attacks aren't unknown in human beings. What your uncle is up against is a bit different."

HE SMILED, as if waiting for a protest of incredulity. Jerry did not make it. Instead, he waited, frowning, for more.

Blakelock shrugged.

"Your uncle's affair first turned up in Urga about a dozen years ago," he observed. "It was in the market-place. Quite without warning, everybody within a certain radius of one man seemed to turn into a slobbering beast, fascinated by one individual in the middle. They stared at him. They padded about him, watching him with hot, glaring eyes. And then one of them began to yelp hysterically, and all of them snarled and howled and plunged upon the poor devil in their midst. He was torn literally to bits in a matter of seconds. Then the mob wavered and broke—and except for blood spots on their garments, you couldn't tell who'd been involved."

Jerry stared.

"That's—like what they tried to do to Wong, my uncle's servant."

"So I gathered," said Blakelock. He pushed forward the tray with the decanter and siphon. "You'd better have another drink. This Scotch is fairly good."

He knocked off the ash of his

cigaret, then crushed it out interestedly. He seemed to be reveling in the sensation of civilization, as exemplified by the comfort of the quarters he had borrowed.

"Devilish thing, that," he said a moment later. "The poor chap that was pulled to bits had no warning. One minute he was talking to his friends, maybe driving a shrewd bargain. The next, the men who'd been jostling him comfortably, maybe grinning while he bargained, were staring at him, turned to beasts. And then they began to snarl at him, exactly like beasts. And then they killed him. They couldn't help it, either. I nearly ran in a wolf-pack myself."

"You—did?" asked Jerry.

"NOT quite," said Blakelock. He smiled, not very pleasantly. "After that first affair in Urga, there were a number more. I dare say there were twenty or thirty such cases. They were too incredible to believe except where they happened, so they made no stir in the world. But the word went about, as such things do in the East, that the men who'd been killed had refused to do what the Black Shamans wanted.

"A man would be visited by one of those devil-priests. He'd be ordered to give up most of his money, or perhaps a pretty daughter, to the Black Shamans. If he refused, nothing happened for a while. Then, quite suddenly, he'd be torn to bits. Sometimes by his nearest neighbors; sometimes by human wolf-packs in which even White Shamans were seen.

"There was a story of one man who was literally torn to shreds by his own family. A sort of sudden insanity came over them. They remembered afterward what they'd done, but they didn't know why. And the general explanation was that it was magic and that it was best to do as the Black Shamans said. That went on for nearly two years."

Blakelock's expression was grim.

"Then a Black Shaman priest was torn to bits by his fellows. Then another. One day the highest grade, superior devil-priest, the very archbishop of Satan, was pulled apart by a howling, snarling mob of worshipers and subordinate priests. That was the wolf-pack I nearly ran in."

Jerry was listening, fascinated.

"It was a big devil-worship ceremony," drawled Blakelock. "Satan was becoming respectable just then in Mongolia, and was worshiped in a big temple, all black and crimson, with carved figures on it that would make you disgusted and ashamed that you belonged to the human race. A swarming, sweating mob of worshipers and lookers-on—Mongols, Buriats, Russians, Chinese, Koreans. All Mongolia was there. The throbbing of a big drum beat upon our ears and the procession of the Black Shamans appeared. It passed close by me.

"And suddenly I got the reek of something overpoweringly disgusting. My head swam, and I hated something, and I lusted for something, and all the world was a red mist in which I could see only one thing clearly—the black-and-red figure of the Grand Shaman. I felt my hands clutching into claws. I felt my lips twisting back into a snarl. And then I broke out of it, with sweat pouring down me.

"I saw a fat, bland Chinese merchant looking at me with intense interest. He was paying no attention at all to something that was beginning just a little way on inside the temple. Some worshipers were running away, screeching with terror. Others seemed to be snarling like beasts. And I heard the Grand Shaman shriek in the most awful terror that any man could ever feel. They pulled him down half a minute later."

Blakelock shrugged. Then he smiled wryly.

"Sounds mad, doesn't it? That Chinese merchant explained it later."

"What was the explanation?" demanded Jerry, fascinated.

"Oh, it was rather involved." Blakelock stifled a yawn. "The Black Shamans had a new drug that made men act like wolves (the East is full of drugs we've no knowledge of), and they'd been blackmailing. But they set to work on members of the Society of Infinite Benevolence, which is a sort of tong composed of very rich merchants.

"Three or four members of the order were killed. So the society set to work to find out what was what. They found the secret and wiped out the man who'd mixed the drug for the Black Shamans, after they'd tortured him into teaching them how to make it themselves. And then they used that drug on the Black Shamans."

"What sort of drug was it?"

"How do I know? There are oriental drugs whose effects are simply incredible. I could tell you tales of men whose wills were utterly taken away. But you wouldn't believe me. This particular stuff was sprayed on a man or flung on his clothes. He himself would get an overdose. After the first whiff his sense of smell would be paralyzed and he wouldn't know that he had it on him. But it was beastly strong twenty feet away.

"As for the odor, it made you hysterical and made you want to destroy the thing that smelled that way. I've heard that a drug acts more strongly on the olfactory nerves than when injected. A chap proved it to me once by getting dead-drunk on half a spoonful of brandy snuffed up his nose. I don't know how he stood it, but I suppose that this stuff acted the same way."

Blakelock tilted up his glass and set it down. In some indefinable way he gave the impression that he had finished his story. Jerry sat still, watching him.

"But the Chinese merchant told you——" he said dubiously.

"He'd been watching me," Blakelock explained indifferently, "to see if it would affect a white man as it did an oriental. He'd flung it on the Grand Shaman's robe, as an agent of the Society of Infinite Benevolence. And he told me about it because he wanted me to describe my symptoms. I obliged him. He was a good sort of chap—for a Chinese."

"BUT—how does this affect my uncle?" asked Jerry.

"I don't know," said Blakelock. He shrugged. "I told you I'd tell you what I knew. I've done it."

Jerry thought it over, frowning.

"Assuming that you're right about the drug," he said dubiously, "you mean that the Society of Infinite Benevolence, a Chinese tong, is back of the wolf-pack appearances?"

"I didn't say anything of the sort," said Blakelock dryly. "I just said that in Mongolia the society had been behind similar occurrences."

"But why would they attack my aunt's dog and a cab-horse and Wong, instead of my uncle?"

"Perhaps," said Blakelock indifferently, "to point out to him that it can strike where it pleases, and to make him agree to its terms."

"Which are?"

"How do I know?" Blakelock shrugged. "You're making all the guesses now. I've told you what I know. If you choose to call me a madman or a liar, you may."

"Couldn't you—suggest some way of combating this—drug?"

"No," said Blakelock. He tapped his lips to hide a yawn.

Jerry made an impatient gesture.

"It sounds so—so absurd!" he said angrily. "Yet I believe it's true. Look here! Would you give this data to Doctor——"

Blakelock held up his hand, smiling grimly.

"One of my two conditions," he observed, "was that what I told you wasn't to be repeated to any one who'd have me locked up to have my head examined. If any one comes to me and says you told him that I know something about these man-wolves, I'll deny it. If he repeats every word I've said to you, I'll say you dreamed it. My dear fellow, I'm not so altruistic that I'll buck up against the Society of Infinite Benevolence out of sheer sympathy for your uncle. And there's no use arguing about it. I'm too sleepy to argue, anyway."

Jerry flushed. He felt as if he were being dismissed.

"But in common decency——" he began doggedly.

"There are times," said Blakelock dryly, "when common decency is not a claim. I can't imagine, for instance, any call of common decency which would make me get in the way of a sixteen-inch shell when the action would do no good to anybody concerned." He stood up, smiling rather frostily. "And I repeat that if you send anybody to me to question me about the affair, I'll assure them that you dreamed the whole conversation."

Jerry went away feeling that he had been uncommonly impertinent.

CHAPTER VII

THE MADNESS OF GRAHAME

DOWN in the empty, lamp-lit street, Jerry stopped to light a cigaret in baffled and embarrassed perplexity. The sky overhead had that filmy opacity which the sky over New York always seems to have at night. Not many stars shine down. There is smoke to interfere, perhaps. Certainly the glow of the city's many lights pales the little twinkling specks that elsewhere lend mystery to the dark hours.

Here there was the smell of dust, and some one somewhere had hosed off the sidewalk before an impressive apartment building, and that lent a little cool fragrance to the air. For the rest, there was the smell of motor-cars, and asphalt, and the indefinable aroma which fills every city at night and is different for every other city in the world.

The street was empty. A big black limousine purred northward with a light in its tonneau, where a man dozed lightly with his silk hat slightly askew. A taxi careered around a corner, glittering with red-and-blue lights, and deposited a passenger on the opposite side of the street.

Jerry raised his hand.

"Taxi!"

With a roar the car shot up to the corner, swung in a wide curve, and came to a stop before him. The door swung open upon a wide and cavernous interior. Jerry gave his address to the driver.

"Pardon," said a suave voice as he stepped inside.

He glanced out of the lowered glass in the car door, and saw a smoothly clipped imperial and mustache, very much like the conventional idea of a physician's hirsute adornment. A wide-brimmed felt hat shaded the upper part of the face beside the cab.

"What is it?" asked Jerry.

Moved by a sudden impulse, he snapped on the light-switch. The interior of the cab glowed suddenly, and before the man outside could draw away Jerry had seen his face.

Slanted, almond eyes shone startled in the sudden illumination, oddly incongruous to the silky imperial. The man drew back.

"How," asked the suave voice in perfect, accentless English, "will I find Madison Avenue?"

"Yer on it," interposed the chauffeur briskly.

He slipped in the clutch, and the taxi started with a swift rush.

JERRY made an arrested gesture as if to halt the cab. There were at least two reasons for a sudden tingling feeling that went all over him. One was the fact that the man was plainly an Oriental, despite the perfection of his English, and Jerry had a singular hunch that four words, "Society of Infinite Benevolence," said suddenly to the man who had asked the absurd question, would have made him start, at least.

But the other reason for the unpleasant, icy sensation at the base of Jerry's spine was a definite impression that just for a moment he had smelled a strange odor. A beastly, disgusting odor, overpoweringly strong. He thought it lingered still in the cab.

He sat quite still, feeling queer all over. Blakelock had said that the first whiff of the man-wolf drug paralyzed the sense of smell of a man close to it—such as a man on whose clothes it had been sprayed. And that a man farther away became filled with an hysterical hatred of the things that smelled of the man-wolf drug.

Jerry was wondering—and feeling very cold as he wondered—if something had been sprayed on him; if, when he alighted from the cab, he would find men staring at him with hot and fascinated eyes.

He leaned forward to where a rush of cool night air came from beside the chauffeur.

"Did you smell something odd just now?" he asked abruptly.

"Yeah," said the chauffeur absently. "Like somethin' dead. I don't smell it now."

He swung expertly around a corner and came to a stop with a grinding of brakes. Jerry made a sudden grim resolution. He saw Grahame strolling along toward him, evidently just getting home. Jerry slipped out of his top-coat and carried it rolled up in a bundle when he stepped out of the cab.

He nodded curtly to Grahame, who had introduced Blakelock earlier in the evening. Grahame had quarters on the top floor.

"I say, Grahame," said Jerry, carefully keeping his voice natural, "stop in my place and have a drink, won't you? I want to ask you something."

"Righto!" said Grahame cheerfully. He wrinkled his nose suddenly. "My God! What an odor! Let's go inside."

Jerry could smell nothing whatever. He felt his lips tense, and as he walked beside Grahame to the elevator with the rolled-up top-coat under his arm, he found himself growing grimmer and, he suspected, rather pale. He watched Grahame closely. And he saw Grahame's hands closing and unclosing, and his eyes becoming wide and fascinated.

A blast of air swept down upon them as the elevator shot upward. They went into Jerry's rooms together. The telephone was ringing insistently while they entered.

Jerry tossed the rolled-up coat

onto a chair and went to the telephone. He lifted the receiver and found himself saying in a strange voice:

"Carruthers speaking. You'll have to wait a moment."

The receiver made tiny noises, but he was not listening. Jerry was watching, through two open doors, the chair on which he had thrown his coat.

There was dead silence in there. Grahame would have seated himself comfortably by now, to light a cigaret and wait until Jerry came back. Jerry watched impassively, though with every muscle oddly taut.

EVERYTHING was very still. There was only the faint purr of a motor somewhere down in the street, the ticking of a clock, the muted clang of the elevator-gates downstairs. Suddenly hoarse, panted breathing and a low, strangled snarl. Then Jerry saw something which was crouched and unhuman snatch up his coat. He heard snarlings and gaspings and the sound of tearing cloth. Then suddenly it stopped. There was dead silence again.

"Hello," said Jerry into the telephone. In spite of himself, his voice trembled a little.

"Jerry! Jerry! What's happened?"

It was Joyce's voice—Joyce Middleton, who was the daughter of the Senior Member and very, very secretly engaged to Jerry. She seemed to be in a panic.

"Nothing," said Jerry, steadying his voice more successfully this time. "What's the matter, Joyce? How'd you happen to call me so late?"

"It was because Daddy came home angry with you. I wanted to know what happened between the two of you. But, Jerry, I just heard awful noises through the phone! What were they? What's the matter?"

"Nothing," said Jerry grimly. "I—— Listen, Joyce. Will you be awake for half an hour more?"

"Of course."

"I'll call you in fifteen minutes."

"But, Jerry——"

"There's nothing wrong. Quite the contrary. But please wait just fifteen minutes."

Jerry hung up in the middle of her frightened little cry. He stood still for a moment, listening. There was still no sound from the living-room, though he could see half a dozen fragments of cloth that had been his top-coat.

Jerry went into his bedroom and slipped his revolver into his pocket. Then—smiling rather queerly—he picked up a seltzer siphon and bottle and returned to the living-room.

Grahame was sunk down in a chair, staring stupidly at the shreds of cloth all about the floor. He looked up in something close to terror as Jerry came in.

"I—I tore your coat, Carruthers," he said stupidly. "I don't know why. I—I think I must have had the horrors."

Jerry nodded.

"Not exactly, at that. I expected you to do something of the sort. Have a drink. I want to ask you something."

Grahame took the drink, shivering. He stared at the shreds of cloth. He looked like a man who feels himself going insane.

"I don't know why I did it," he muttered. "My God! Carruthers, I might have gone at you in the same way!"

"It was probably intended that you should," said Jerry composedly. "Drink down your glass and tell me what you know about Blakelock."

"Blakelock?" Grahame looked up dully. "Nothing. He was in the billiard-room at the club. I assumed he was all right. The wrong sort doesn't often get into the club. We played nearly an hour before dinner. Then I introduced him to you. I'd an engagement, and kept it. That's all I know."

His eyes went back to the fragments of cloth on the floor.

"Did he tell you anything about himself?" asked Jerry.

"Only that he'd just arrived in New York. From Mongolia, I think he said." Grahame licked his lips. "Look here, Carruthers, I'm going up to my quarters. I—I've got to figure this thing out. I don't know why I tore your coat. I've got to find out what's the matter with me! Am I going mad?"

"Hardly," said Jerry. "Blakelock said he'd done the same thing you just did, or nearly. I know what's up. You go and get some sleep, and you'll probably be all right in the morning."

"I—I'll pay you for the coat," said Grahame hauntedly. "I'm strapped right now, but I'll pay you for it. My God! I must have been mad!"

He fumbled his way to the door. Jerry closed it behind him and picked up the bits of his coat. He sniffed at them, but could discover no odor whatever. He smiled rather bleakly. His failure to smell what Grahame had smelled was no doubt due to the fact that his nostrils were still numbed by the first overpowering strength of the man-wolves' drug.

He picked up the telephone to call Joyce, but called Blakelock instead. Very composedly, he told him what had occurred.

"I'm telling you," he added, "because it's apparent they know I saw you, and they may suspect you told me something. You'd better look out for yourself, hadn't you?"

Blakelock's voice was definitely grim.

"I'm planning to. A note was pushed under my door not five minutes after you left, saying that I should know better than to meddle in the affairs of the Society, and that I knew what to expect. I do."

Jerry said dryly:

"It looks like you've stepped into the path of a sixteen-inch shell, doesn't it?"

"Without my having heeded the call of common decency." Blakelock's tone was wry, but he was taking it calmly, as such a thing needed to be taken. "I say, that was a clever idea, discarding your coat. I'm in the same fix you're in, and we're both in the same fix as your uncle. We'd better join forces."

"I WAS about to suggest it," said Jerry. "I dare say I'm picked as a victim to help convince my uncle."

"Probably." Blakelock seemed to be thinking busily. "Look here. They know you had the drug on you, and it's certain they knew Grahame went into the apartment-house with you. For a while, at least, they'll believe he's killed you. And they'll never expect me to leave here to-night. I'll start out from here in five minutes and stop for you. Can you see a taxi in the street from your flat?"

"Yes," said Jerry.

"I'll phone for a cab and make a bolt for your place. I'll have the cabman pass it three times. The third time you make a run for it from the door and get into the cab before anything can be flung on you. We'll go to see your uncle. With the three of us——"

"That's the best plan," admitted Jerry. "I'll look for you in ten minutes."

"Right."

The telephone clicked. Jerry

waited a moment, grimly. Then he called up Joyce.

CHAPTER VIII

VANISHING LETTERS

THOMAS CARRUTHERS, ESQ., regarded his nephew and Blakelock with a peculiar mixture of relief and amusement when Jerry had explained their predicament.

"I'm sorry," he observed, "but it's a comfort to have some one about, in the same fix. Now you see, Jerry," he added dryly, "that things are not always what they seem. It is a salutary lesson to be learned, though it is quite possible that none of the three of us will live long enough to benefit by it."

Jerry had been thinking while waiting for Blakelock and in the cab coming over.

"My idea, sir," he proposed eagerly, "is that we should call in some one who's an expert on this stuff and lay the case before him. Perhaps he'll know something that will nullify the danger we're in, something to protect us. Meanwhile, we're practically besieged."

"An expert in what?" asked his uncle skeptically. "Lycanthropy—which is the science of werwolves—or insanity? There are no experts in the first, and an expert in the second would diagnose the case as communicable insanity for all of us. As for the state of siege, I've been in it for two weeks or more."

"I mean drugs," said Jerry. "Blakelock has some data on the stuff that turns men to wolves."

The elder Carruthers turned to Blakelock, who drawled a succinct account of what he had learned in Mongolia. It was practically a repetition of what he had told Jerry.

"I'm tempted," he added with a faint smile, "to apologize for telling such incredible things even to you."

Carruthers had listened absorbedly.

"It's likely," he admitted in relief. "I've seen some damned queer things in Mongolia, Blakelock. So have you, no doubt. To tell the truth, I had my doubts about its being authentic black magic. I've seen things done that may have been due to drugs—other drugs—and may have been due to almost anything else impossible. But in the meantime we're besieged, as Jerry says. Damn it, one step outside these rooms and we may be ringed in by a snarling wolf-pack! We won't know if the stuff has been flung on us."

"I did," interposed Jerry.

"That might not always help," said Blakelock calmly. "Not always. For my part, I'm scared stiff. Friends—if I had any—are no protection. Guards are no use. As a matter of fact, your man Wong was lucky—devilish lucky—that the stuff had all evaporated when he ran into that police station. Otherwise he'd have been mobbed by men in uniform. Ugh!"

Then he shrugged and lay back in his chair calmly.

"We'll try Jerry's idea anyhow," said Carruthers doubtfully. "Jerry, suppose you call this friend of yours, this Grahame, and ask if he'll describe his experience to, say, Dr. Waite. He's a good man. He may be able to think of something to neutralize the horrible stuff."

Jerry took up the phone. He was conscious for a moment of a sardonic smile on Blakelock's face. But he forgot it during his talk with Grahame, which was at first crisp, then protesting, and then indignant. He hung up with a blank face.

"He swears now," he said bewilderedly, "that nothing of the sort happened!"

"He would," said Blakelock calmly. "So would I. So would you. Who wants to admit a paroxysm of homicidal insanity? We'll get no evidence to present to anybody to prove we're not mad. Tell me, sir"—he was addressing Carruthers—"is it the Society of Infinite Benevolence?"

"Yes," said Carruthers. "They want money from me. I began to get threatening letters three months ago. They reminded me of things I'd seen and heard of in Mongolia, and assured me those same things would happen here in New York unless I paid up. I didn't believe they could make good. But they told me they'd prove it. That was day before yesterday. Last night the wolf-pack ran. This morning a letter came reminding me—and warning me—that the wolf-packs would pull me down if I didn't pay up today. I didn't."

"What are their demands, sir?" asked Blakelock. He hesitated, and observed: "They weren't a blackmailing tong in Mongolia."

"They want half a million," said Carruthers. "And they say it isn't blackmail, but restitution for harm done to Mongolian members of the society by the Mongolian Trading Company."

"I was about to say you'd better pay up," said Blakelock thoughtfully. "But you won't pay that much!"

"It's probably too late now, anyway," Carruthers said in ghastly levity. "I was supposed to pay before noon. And there were a couple of them—the beasts they make out of men—scratching at my door a few hours ago."

"Their letters!" said Jerry suddenly. "There's some evidence! We can prove we aren't insane by them."

"May I see them?" asked Blakelock.

Carruthers reached into a desk and handed him a packet of pluperfectly neat envelopes. The paper was a peculiar one, distinctly oriental.

"Read them," said Carruthers, smiling without any mirth.

Blakelock slid the first paper out of its envelope. He stared at it.

"It's blank!"

"Just so," assented Carruthers sardonically. "Within half an hour after the envelope was opened there was no message visible. It began to fade almost as I read it. Where's your evidence there, Jerry?"

BLAKELOCK passed the sheet of paper to Jerry, who turned it over and over, staring at it for a sign of a word or even for a pen-sketch on the smooth fiber of the paper. Blakelock passed him another, and then another.

"Hullo!" said Blakelock, "you didn't open this one."

Carruthers's eyes went queer.

"Let me see it!"

Blakelock passed it over while looking curiously at an envelope taken from his own pocket. His own sheet of paper was blank like all the others. He shrugged.

Carruthers was tearing open the envelope which Blakelock had handed him. It was exactly like the others, except that instead of the hotel address on the outside—in ordinary ink, in a smooth and flowing handwriting—this was merely addressed to *Thomas Carruthers, Esq.* In one corner was an ironic *By hand.*

With suddenly trembling fingers Carruthers pulled out the sheet of folded paper. And there was a sudden flood of a strange, musky, horrible scent.

Blakelock was on his feet, darting forward.

"Smell it, you fool!" he shouted.

He tore the paper from Carruthers's fingers, thrust it into the older man's face, and then crushed it against his own and Jerry's. He turned sharply to where Wong was watching, wide-eyed.

"Quick!" he snapped. "Smell this! Deeply!"

With a howl of terror, Wong fled.

Blakelock wiped off his forehead. Carruthers's revolver was out and trained upon him. Blakelock grinned.

"If I say it myself," he said coolly, "that was quick thinking. That letter's saturated with the wolf-drug. If you'd held it in your hand a moment or two longer, the three of us would have rushed you, sir."

Carruthers's face had been grim. Now it became ghastly.

"I—see," he said slowly. He put down his weapon. "Wong's run away."

"We've all had an overdose of the scent," said Blakelock coolly. "We're all immune to its effects. But an outsider, coming in here now, would probably try to destroy this room and all that's in it. Let's put this sheet of paper under water and read it."

Carruthers's hands were shaking undisguisedly as he poured water into the siphon-tray. Blakelock thrust the sheet of paper under the surface, and the smell ceased to be overpowering. The precise black characters read:

> The finding of this letter should prove to you that the Society has been merely lenient with you. If you survive the next hour, you will realize that you must meet its demands.

The message itself did not move Carruthers, but his face was ghastly.

"How did that get into my desk?" he demanded shrilly. "How did it get into my desk? They must be invisible!"

"It's certain," said Blakelock coolly, "that this hotel isn't the safest place on earth. Somebody, somehow, brought that in here."

He leaned over to read the message again. The paper was blank.

"The water must have speeded up the fading process," he observed. "No evidence here, even if we called some one in right away. If we do anything to protect ourselves, we'll be confined as lunatics. If we don't, we'll be killed by a wolf-pack."

He lighted a cigaret. Jerry, very pale, was sniffing painstakingly at the separated envelopes. His uncle was staring at nothing, his face gray.

"I've changed my mind," said Blakelock briefly. "This is a bit too much for me. There are too many people around if the Society selects me as the object of a demonstration. I'm going to leave, especially as that letter hints at something fiendish within the next hour. If I'm not killed before I get away, I'm going somewhere off in the country, where not more than one or two people are likely to smell that damned stuff if it's put on me."

"I—I also," said Carruthers. He forced himself to seem normal. "Whatever they plan, if I move suddenly it will throw them off. I'm going back to my place up the Hudson. At once. Jerry?"

"I'll come, too," said Jerry absently. "Of course."

Blakelock went over to the window.

"It might be a good idea to have some fresh air. My nostrils are full of the infernal stuff."

He opened the window and came back.

"Just for safety's sake, we'll get rid of this," he added grimly. He pulled the wetted sheet of paper from the tray of water, rolled it into a ball, and flung it out of the window. "Now, do you want me to come with you?"

"I—I think you'd better," said Carruthers, shivering. "Three men are always better than two." He was trying to resume his customary air of sardonic calmness. "We'll get a car to take us up. There are passengers on trains."

His lips twitched in a nervous grin, which froze suddenly.

From the street, far below, there had come a sudden eerie, long-continued, and mournful howl. It was not at all the sort of sound that should ever come from any human throat. A second voice joined it. Then a third.

The second part of THE MAN-WOLVES will appear in the March, 1929, issue of MYSTERY STORIES

Periodical Human Animals

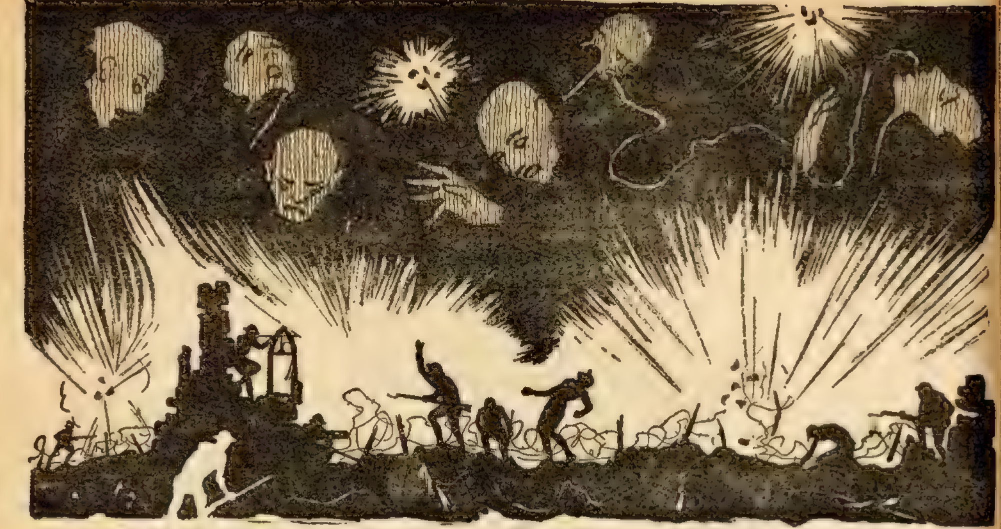
By ARTHUR F. HARRIS

NUMEROUS are the anecdotes that have come down to us from the Middle Ages, of human beings supposed to be changed at times into wolves. A common belief was that this transformation occurred periodically or for a certain length of time, usually seven years.

It is related that a certain nobleman in Prussia in the sixteenth century had a peasant of his district brought before him and sentenced to prison for attacking his neighbors' cattle in the form of a wolf, and devouring them. The change with him appeared to be an involuntary one, occurring twice a year, at Christmas and midsummer. He was said to exhibit much uneasiness and discomfort when the wolf hair began to break through his skin, and his bodily shape to change. He was described as an ill-favored, almost deformed man, with his face covered with scars made by dogs when he was in his wolf shape.

John of Nuremberg, an old chronicler, tells of a priest who, traveling through a wild region, lost his way in a forest about nightfall. Presently he saw a glow among the trees, and discovered a fire, with a wolf sitting, apparently brooding over it. The priest was of course alarmed, but the wolf spoke to him reassuringly in a man's voice. He said he was a man of the Ossyrian race, of which some man and woman were always doomed to spend seven years in wolf form. He begged the priest to visit his wife, who was ill, to console her and give her the last sacrament. The priest observed that both the wolf-man and wolf-woman used their forepaws just like human hands. Just before the she-wolf died, she peeled off the wolf skin from her head down to her waist, and the priest saw the body and features of an aged, gray-haired woman.

In the sixteenth century at least three men were tried and executed in France upon their own confessions that while in wolf form they had killed and eaten children. One man at Limberg confessed that as a wolf he had eaten forty-two children. He was put to death with terrible torture.



I see the battle-fields sometimes. We all go there to help when we can.

Messages From Those Who Have "Gone West"

Recorded through Automatic Writing

Compiled from the original script

By Z. E. P.

Do you believe that it is possible for the dead to communicate with the living through automatic writing? Many people do. We are printing these records by a well-known writer who vouches for their authenticity.

IT WAS during the World War, between the dates of March 23 and April 13, 1918, that these messages were recorded by Mrs. B., through automatic writing. In one a prophecy is given that the war is to end soon. Mrs. B. is not a professional medium, but an earnest seeker after truth, and one who is possessed of considerable psychic power. The writings took place near San Diego, California, and the compiler of this article was present on each occasion.

The term "automatic writing" may need explanation to those who have never seen it done. The medium's physical hand, arm, and even brain seem to be controlled (without any sign of trance condition) by some psychic or outside force which transcribes messages through the pencil held by the writer. The import of a message is often absolutely foreign to the knowledge of the medium, and its script is frequently entirely different from the natural handwriting of the writer. In the following record there was a decided difference in the style, appearance, and manner of writing with each new personality being expressed through Mrs. B.'s hand.

I present these messages as they were written, omitting only those of a strictly personal nature, of which there were a few. What force it is that causes such phenomena I do not know, and there is much discussion pro and con regarding it. You may draw your own conclusions from this record. I seek to present only what evidence came under my personal observation, knowing that Mrs. B.'s integrity is beyond question.

On March 23, 1918, Mrs. B. and I called on a friend who has a charming little home on Point Loma.

As we were sitting down to watch Mrs. B. write automatically, I made the remark: "What a lovely atmosphere this dear little house has!"

The owner replied: "No cross word has ever been spoken in this house."

Almost immediately Mrs. B. began to write as follows:

Lovely indeed! If all mortals could say *that*, this old planet would change its name.

This came so unexpectedly to all of us that we laughed, and the pencil in Mrs. B.'s hand waved to us to be silent.

Now for what we came. You make periodical journeys here, and we are getting so we look for them. Great things come from small beginnings, and we hope to do big things for you some day. If you try to write for us every chance you have we may be able to give the world a great deal that it should enjoy having.

Hesitation of the pencil, which we questioned.

It's a case of which one of us shall write. We will take turns. First myself.

Question: "Who are you?"

Walter, you may know me by. We are all eager—never mind the pause, just a little discussion about what to write first, because there is so much we might say. You, of course, are thinking only of your own personal affairs or of the great topic, the War! Your own affairs! Each one of us has them, even here, away from you all. And the *War!* Ah, it is too much a general topic. We who have so recently come out of it wish it were not so big—for if you could see the astral world over the battle-fields of Europe you would know why some of us come to this little, quiet, peaceful spot to rest our nerves and our perceptions, and get a general toning up of atmosphere.

After a slight pause there came a different writing, in a decided backhand script, where the other had been large and flowing.

NOW another! Don't pause. I want to speak, too. Not that I have more to say than my brother, but we are eager to impress upon this world the necessity of knowing what it means to come out of an earthly hell and come into a condition for which we are totally unprepared. If only the world could shake off the old, orthodox idea of Heaven. Oh, my! What a farce it is!

Another pause, and again a different writing, which was almost printing.

Now me, Tom. Now, you think that I, too, have come to talk about the War. Guess again. I don't want any more of it *at all*. I want to say that this that they call death is not what we used to dread. It's a lovely thing, and I'd rather be here *dead* than on earth alive, and I used to be actually *afraid*. Oh, boy! What a wrong idea. You don't know what a joy it is to live here in this lovely place. All about me is music, flowers, love, happiness, and all my dear ones that I had thought were lost to me. But you don't dread death yourself — evidently you weren't taught as I was. You're lucky.

Back again to the first writing.

WE HAVE all had our turn. Now what can we tell you?

Question: "Tell us more about your world."

We would have some job to tell you all about it, but the music is a thing I might touch upon. We sometimes hear your music, because sound travels even into our world. But we have our own music—oh, so lovely!—and we can *see* it, for it radiates all about us in beautiful colors.

At this point a large cat which I had been holding on my lap started to jump onto the table, and interrupted the writing. I pulled the cat back, and the pencil continued:

Cats have a peculiar vibration, and we are not always pleased by it. It is all right, of course, but it is sometimes annoying. Colors, too——

Mrs. S., the owner of the cat, here thought it best to put the cat outside, and her movement to do so caused the writing to cease again. It was some minutes before it would continue, and then only after the question: "What did you mean by giving big things to the world?"

We make no promises. The possibility is here for a big idea to be put across. You see by our talk that we are recently of your plane. There is one among us who speaks a different language.

Quite a pause followed, then in a writing very different from any of the others, and very rapid, so that it made Mrs. B.'s arm ache, came the following:

How! How! I, Oam, greet you of the white people. I come from a long ago to say, why do you who know so much of this our plane of thought try to find out what you already know? If you can do good thereby, that is another story, but unless you are sure of the good do not attempt to do something from which harm may come. You think me Indian.

Because of the "How! How!" greeting.

YOU are wrong. I come from Siam. Siam the last time, but not always. Sometimes I come from Budapest, and sometimes from Cairo, and many other places have I called home. You, too, could turn your gaze inward and backward, could see many lands and many mothers. What a strange idea—*one life!* Why is it? The future is born every minute, so comes it true, as the cart follows behind the ox, and the night follows the day.

Thus ended the writing for that night.

It was not until April 3, in another town near San Diego, that Mrs. B. wrote again. This time only three people were present, Mrs. B., a Miss P. (an elderly lady who had never witnessed automatic writing, and who was frankly skeptical of all psychic manifestations), and I. It was at Miss P.'s desire to see "how it worked" that we sat down to the dining-room table, under the full glare of the electric lights (Mrs. B. never worked in the dark), and the following message was written:

Many here. I am come to tell you of many things. Now listen well, don't let your thoughts interrupt at all if you can help it. Let your mind be blank. Here are many people around you, some good and some bad, but all just newly here and very much interested in what they see you doing. Now, mark you, they all want to try, but is it wise for you or for them? I want them to see you as you are, an earnest student, but they see you as an object to amuse. Fix your thoughts on seriousness whenever you sit down to this work. Concentrate on the *kind* of person you want. I do not know whether I fill the bill or not, but I have your interest at heart. I have been here a long time and my work lies close to the earth, but not for much longer. I must hasten on.

THIS great war has brought many of us down close to earth; and we have much to do. Now you can help some of these newcomers when they come to you. Instead of seeking information from them, you can tell them more about the world they have so recently entered than they can tell you. *You* enter it every night in your sleep and carry back with you the first impression of the dawn of life everlasting, and that is what I want to impress upon you to-night. We are working hard for all these hundreds of souls that have so recently come to us. You can help us—now *do* it. Whenever they linger around you this way, talk to them. They come often, for you shine like a psychic center and attract the wanderers of our world.

That is the main idea that I wished to impress upon you to-night: the great need that we feel is to have some one on earth to help us in just this way, for earth thoughts have a *force* about them that penetrates far and near. We think, too, very hard, but our thoughts do not penetrate to the earth as earth-thoughts come through to our world.

The war is nearing an end, but we have much yet to do, oh, *so* much! We have an awful year ahead of us, but God willing, and with the help of every one, it will pass as it should. Now you must stop, and this is positively all for to-night. Say good-by in your mind to all these soldiers waiting here for their turn. It does not help them to do this, but your other thoughts can help them. Meet me to-night in your sleep. We can help together.

Sometimes there is considerable nonsensical or meaningless or strictly personal writing, and then suddenly a strong individuality asserts itself and writes something like the following, which was signed by the name of an old friend of both Mrs. B.'s and mine. At another time he sent through us a message to his mother, which is of too personal a nature to record here, but which amazed the mother because of her son's knowledge of a problem which she alone knew about at the time. The following came on April 4, 1918.

CAN'T you tell who is writing? I can see you all right. I wish you could see me. It seems so queer to be talking to you this way, when you and I used to talk so much. You were some jolly kid, and I hate to see so much trouble around you, but I guess you can stand it or you would not be here now.

Mrs. B. had been going through some difficult experiences.

There is something I want to say to you. See if you can get it for me. You know——

Here came some unreadable scrawls, which were scratched through, before the writing became clear again.

What's the matter? Try again. Let me see you sometimes in the astral plane. You go there often, don't you? Then I can tell you what I want, for somehow the things of this world are hard to describe in the words of the English language, or of any other, for that matter. I see the battle-fields sometimes. We all go there to help when we can, and if you who live here on earth could see it as we see it you'd fight, fight, fight to end it. I tell you, it stirs one up. It's awful, just awful. But, oh, if you could see some of the beautiful things that come of it!

HERE at my side is a little lady whose mother is in the camps of the Germans. We keep her with us although the thoughts of the mother are impossible to keep from her. She feels them keenly and is so sore-hearted! But the beautiful love that holds these two together, even though we keep them apart, is a beautiful thing to see, and you would appreciate it as I do. I am not the old P. you knew, am I, who used to make love to all the pretty girls? Well, I have come into a realization of what *real* love is, and I take off my cap when I say it. It is there on the battle-fields in all its glory. Soldiers are fighting for their country with love in their hearts for the whole world. Now that sounds strange, but we see it daily. Forget your troubles, girl, and think love—love—love to the fighting nations; it helps out. That's a bit that you can do. It is the light of a whole world.

Later, on April 13th, came the following messages. I had been singing at the piano for some time, when Mrs. B., who was visiting me, suddenly requested paper and pencil. For some moments I had been conscious that the room seemed crowded, although only Mrs. B., Miss P., and I were visibly present.

Go with me to the front. There we will see our boys in the trenches on the battle-fields and in camp. If they could hear this music (referring to my singing) as I hear it, they would indeed be glad of it. The hopelessness of some of these boys is pathetic, but others are the nerve of the army. They are the backbone and are full of vim and fight. Germany wins to-night, *but to-morrow she falls*. Her fight is on. If you could only see the auras around France and Germany as we do. Poor Germany, black and awful like fumes from a coal stack, with here and there a bright flash from some loyal soul. France is red with wrath, but so loyal to the spirit that persists through all the lurid war-clouds.

We are soldiers three, and watch you knit the warm things which are much needed in the winter. But this coming winter will see Germany broken. Her heart is gone now—*it's just a sort of reflex action that drives her on, like the twitching muscles of a dead deer.*

There is much to be said, however, of her wonderful organization that carries itself along by its own momentum. Enough. Next!

The handwriting changed very much, and proceeded more slowly for a few lines.

MY TURN. He talks of war—may I talk of peace and home? My home is in Ireland, and I have wandered here with my comrades, one English, one French, and they have shown me much. But best of all I love the homes, and I ofttimes take a peek into a glowing, warmly-lighted home. The peace of this western country is a relief. Nowhere on the face of the globe do I find it so lovely, even though they are all the while drilling and preparing for war near you.

Camp Kearny was only a few

miles from where this writing was taking place.

There is a far-awayness to the war out here that even the knitting of war-raiment can't drive away.

Again the writing changed.

Now me! Sheep! We follow each other, and so does all humanity! What one does, another imitates, so here are England, Ireland, and France at your elbow. It is pleasant to talk thus, for it is not often we have such a chance. We saw your light and were attracted by the music.

Question: "What do you mean, you saw our light?"

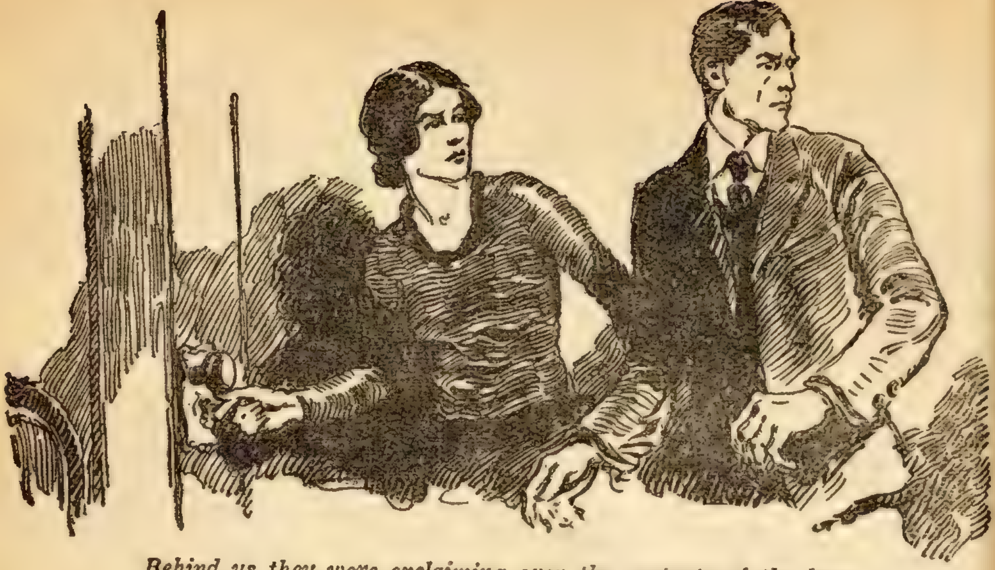
It is hard to describe. It was not the light in the house, but rather the combination of the glows from your auras. Your thoughts are like a lantern, guiding us to your door. It is only those who know something about our life after we leave the body, who shine in that way. But it is hard to make the contact as we have done to-night. The music helped. It seems to concentrate the force. Let us visit you again some time.

With that the writing ceased, and Mrs. B.'s return to her own home prevented any more communications being recorded at that time.

Superstitions of the Theatre

ACTORS, like sailors, are an unusually superstitious group, and have many signs and omens of good or bad luck which are peculiar to their profession.

They believe, for instance, that disaster will follow the sticking of a drop-curtain when it is being raised or lowered; the upsetting of a make-up box; the breaking of a stick of grease-paint while it is in use; stubbing a toe while making a stage entry. Certain shades of yellow in the costume are also regarded as unlucky, as are certain wigs, though others may bring good luck. Moss hair, such as is used for curly beards, is supposed to bring good fortune, but to use liquid glue belonging to another is bad.



Behind us they were exclaiming over the contents of the box.

Dead Reckoning

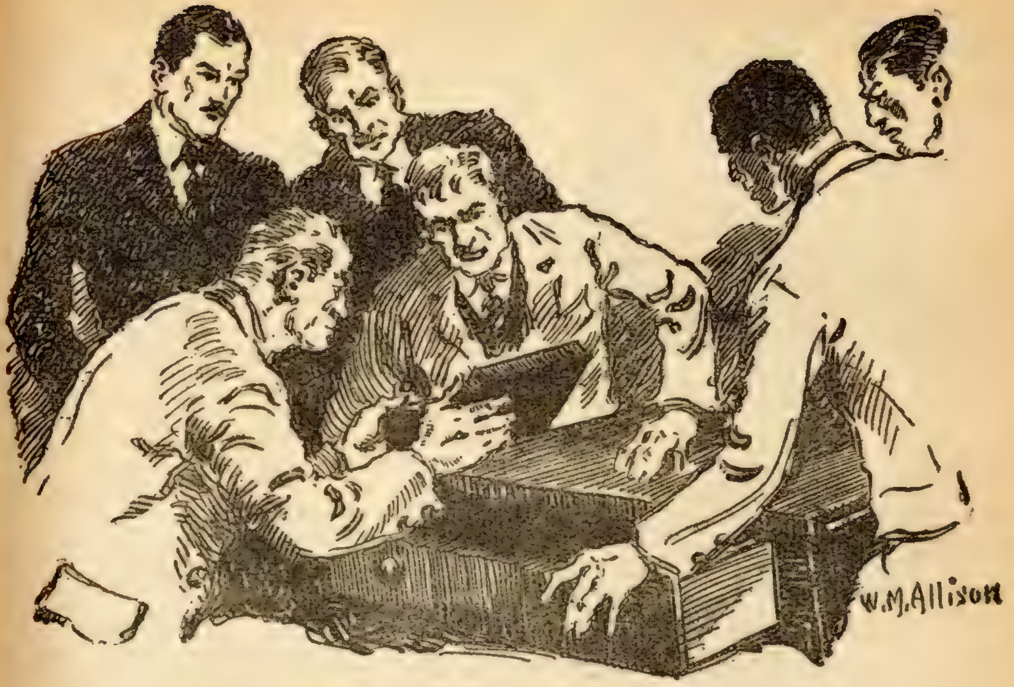
By RICHARD WILMER ROWAN

Six notorious criminals believed that Alonzo Snell had died a rich man. Each of them wanted the money, and was prepared to fight for it. One of them had made certain that he would get it, and then the dead man snapped ghostly fingers at them all.

WE SAT around in the shadowy parlor as wary as wolves, and as dangerous, for even I had not dared to come there unarmed. Snell's life was spent at last, but only a fool would enter defenseless into a home of his; and also I had meant to be armed against myself, knowing how seldom my own rash endeavors had carried me anywhere save down to defeat and the dregs of fortune.

Even before I had a hint of the circumstances of our curious gathering, I had guessed what company I should meet at Snell's. And no matter in what mild, unnatural temper the others might bring themselves to a house of mourning, it seemed to me probable that Snell, reaching back as it were from the grave in which he had just been laid, would contrive to stir them once again to a fury of hate or greed or thwarted cunning.

"Say, how much longer the funeral?"



"What?"

It was like Cork to make Jeff Burney repeat a question he had no intention of answering.

"I mean," said Burney, "how long now will it take 'em to get through, do you suppose?"

"I don't suppose," Cork snapped. "Go find out from the undertaker or God—or somebody else that's up on death and its celebrations."

"But I thought you knew a good deal about homicide——"

Burney's sharpshooting checked abruptly as Jim Cork turned upon him.

"Why, you——" Cork spoke slowly a dozen words more, each surpassing its predecessor in vicious impact and obscenity. Thereafter his sullen voice was still, but his authority was established and predominant.

IT HAD been my purpose to arrive early, so that none could sneer at timidity in me. But I had found Cork already waiting when I appeared. He paced the width of the hall as though it were an elongated cell, head bowed in thought and big hands clasped behind his ugly back. I was unable to tell at a glance whether he affected to pose as a mourner or had perhaps heard some disturbing thing and was genuinely agitated.

Seeing me near him, he gave a small, surly nod; and my response in passing by was as curt as I could make it.

The lean, swarthy woman who answered my ring had indicated that I must wait in the side parlor. She merely motioned toward the stout door which I should open for myself, her gesture so insolent that Snell himself could not have improved upon it. His proper servant, of course, and terribly at home in the dwelling his spirit yet pervaded!

I found my way into the dingy and shuttered room, where, I assumed, the mortal remains of Alonzo Snell had been left in appropriate twilight before and during his funeral services. There had been flowers, too—their heavy scent lingered in place of any foul vapors from the life that he had led. Burney, entering a minute or so after me, sniffed reproachfully and glanced my way, as if I were to blame for the overpowering, sickly fragrance.

He sought a chair as remote from mine as the size of the room permitted. I had, of course, known him at once; and he knew me, though he gave no sign. Neilson was the next of the heirs or former accomplices of Snell to come into the room. Jim Cork followed him. Burney spoke and Cork responded; and I was reminded of other disputes of theirs when I had wished in vain for such a weapon as now grimly weighted the pocket of my overcoat.

"Well—here they come," Neilson said after an awkward interval.

THERE were voices outside the house and then in the hall. The door jerked open noisily and Mort Jessup entered, the prison pallor still upon him; so that his thin face was blue in the dusk which respectable mourning lent as a cloak for our conference.

Directly afterward Kurbisch joined us.

"Good—good! All here, ready for the big news!" he exclaimed, even covering me with his salutation.

His clothes were black and his hat and necktie and gloves also; it was a startling sartorial effect, and manifestly his pride was in it. But with the somber garb his respect for the occasion ended, and he came in dripping his usual oily merriment, more ghastly even than Jessup's pallor in this home of a notorious rascal who was dead and done for finally.

"Hello, Zim," said Burney.

"Hello—hello! How are ya, Jeff?"

"Fine!"

"No tears, no pretending," Kurbisch proclaimed, "just old pals got together for a little doing of duty."

Cork laughed, though without real mirth. Kurbisch accepted it as a tribute, however, and indulged in a prolonged gurgling chuckle of self-approbation.

"GENTLEMEN!"

This time we all laughed.

We had been greeted from the parlor doorway, where a tall, dark young man of rather impressive appearance stood surveying us distastefully.

"How much longer, undertaker?" Burney queried insolently.

"I, sir," said the stranger, "am not the—ah—mortician."

"Mortician, huh?"

"That'll do for you, Jeff," Cork warned him.

"Let me introduce myself," the newcomer pursued. "My name is Garford—Carleton Garford——"

Garford! I was trying to remember where I had heard it before, when Cork interrupted.

"I know it is," he said.

"Indeed?" The other was not interested. "I am named executor of the estate of the late Alonzo Snell," he said.

"What?"

He repeated it slowly.

"Th' hell ya are!"

Garford stared at Cork with tolerant composure.

"Say, Jim, what's the matter?" Kurbisch put in. "Who is he, anyhow?"

"I have told you my name—Garford."

"Yeah, Garford," said Cork. "Zim,

maybe you've heard of 'Grand Duke' Carleton?"

"Sure, you bet! Say! Is this him?"

"Sure it's him," Cork snarled.

Our identification of Garford seemed suddenly unanimous. Carleton Garford—alias G. D. Carleton, blackmailer and notorious manipulator of confidence games—in Snell's house, preparing to settle up his affairs!

"What're you pulling off here? What's the new racket?" Zim Kurbisch found breath to exclaim.

GARFORD, enjoying their discomfiture, smiled ironically.

"Death," said he, "is the ultimate racket."

"You mean you—you killed Snell?"

"Certainly not," said Garford, and when there were murmurs from the skeptical he added sharply: "Be assured, I have ample proof that he died a natural death."

"Then what——"

"I have told you. I was his friend. I am the executor of the Snell estate."

"Where do we come in, then?"

"Yeah, where?" Cork demanded truculently. "There won't be even a loose dime if you're handling things."

"So you expected to inherit?" Garford observed with crushing blandness.

Cork hesitated, his usual domineering tone having thus far made no headway against one several cuts above him in the ranks of the lawless.

But Kurbisch was not dismayed.

"Sure we expected something," he said. "We was—most of us—partners in with Snell at one time or another."

"Partners?" said Garford, his query a mocking challenge.

"Well, you know what I mean."

"I do," he said.

THERE followed an uneasy pause. Mort Jessup and Burney shuffled their feet. Cork was looking at his hands as though he never before had noticed those mighty implements of battle. Neilson, starting to speak, subsided with an irritable grunt.

"When we got the telegrams," Kurbisch said at length, "of course we naturally thought——"

"That it was a trap?"

"No——" Zim was puzzled by the suggestion.

"That you were wanted here?"

"Yes—but I don't like that 'wanted' stuff."

"I withdraw it," said Garford pleasantly. "I sent those telegrams, acting according to Snell's request. You had each received a letter preparing you in a way——"

"But for what? My letter only said——"

"Never mind that!" Garford checked him with surprising curtness. "It is sufficient if you recognized the communication as being in Alonzo Snell's own handwriting. Did you?"

"Sure. But why did it only——"

"Please be patient. I never read any of the letters. I don't know what was in them——"

"Here—I'll show you mine," Kurbisch offered.

"No—wait, please."

"What's all the mystery?"

"We'll consider the letters Snell sent you in a moment. The telegrams instructed you to bring them to-day. Have you all done so?"

"Sure—I just said I'd show you——"

Garford looked toward me, and I nodded. He faced Neilson, who answered by reaching toward his inside coat pocket.

Burney and Jessup said: "Yes."

"Yeah—I got it here," said Cork.

"Very good," Garford resumed. "The telegrams, of course, delivered a uniform message, one that Snell dictated to me before he died."

"Then he knew he was going?"

"He had known it for weeks."

"And you were right here with him all that time?"

"Yes. Through the worst——"

"Not the worst for you, I'll swear," said Cork.

"Just what do you mean to insinuate?"

GARFORD had a lofty and provocative condescension about him which must have made Jim Cork's fingers itch to be at his throat. Yet even a killer of Cork's type learns to use a certain crude guile, an instinctive cunning, before violence.

"Oh, I ain't insinuating a thing," he replied with astonishing mildness of tone.

"You have interrupted repeatedly."

"Too bad!"

"You are insolent!"

Could it be possible that Garford, through his own extensive underworld connections, had informed himself of all our records and reputations and was now deliberately goading Cork to some outbreak?

"I don't like ya, Duke, and it keeps leaking out," Cork explained. "A wise grifter—a con artist—nice white hands, always in somebody else's pockets! Too smart to ever get caught—phony stocks and bonds—just the great big brother to poor widows and orphans!"

"Your disapproval is of no consequence and only wastes our time," said Garford.

"Then I'll just keep on remembering all I heard about ya, Duke, and wondering how it comes ya tied up with Snell. Even dying, he wouldn't be one of yer county fair suckers."

IT WAS Cork now who sought to infuriate the other, for Carleton Garford was reputed to operate on a grand scale and to have preyed upon many of the richest and shrewdest men in the land.

"Suffice to say, I knew Alonzo Snell intimately; had known him for years. We were never partners," he added with sarcasm, "which perhaps explains why he chose to rely on me——"

"Or maybe he died insane?" was Cork's final thrust.

"——and why, when he was first stricken about two months ago, he sent for me."

"He wanted us sent for, too," said Kurbisch, like a child who will not appear slighted.

"Yes, but only after his demise," said Garford. "Not until after the funeral. That he expressly stipulated."

"Not good enough for a burying affair, eh? These here solemn rites we're let in on, men," Burney jeered, "is next after the last."

"Shut yer trap, Jeff," said Cork, who had always detested him.

"Let's all shut up," Kurbisch urged. "We are wasting good time. Leave the Duke talk." He faced Carleton Garford with an ingratiating smirk. "The telegram I got said I was mentioned in the will. How did it mean—*mentioned?*"

"I AM coming to that," said Garford. "Before offering it for probate, Snell thought you ought to be informed of the will's provisions. He believed that it was going to excite a good deal of public interest, and might even result in an official investigation of a sort.

"Knowing rather a lot about the law, I can assure you that the terms of the will are extraordinary enough to deserve such attention. It is only fair to warn you."

"Well, go ahead, warn us," said Cork.

"Who is it gets the money?" Kurbisch put in, misunderstanding the nature of the trouble that Garford predicted.

"His daughter is the sole heir."

"Daughter? Which one?"

"Why, there's only one. Miss Blanche."

"Gawd, that nut! She's in the bug-house."

"On the contrary," Garford retorted, "Miss Snell is not in an asylum. She is here."

"Here — in this house? And where's the high-stepper—Carrie?" Mort Jessup questioned.

"Say, get wise to yourself," Burney advised. "Carrie quit—drifted to Tampico, and I got it straight she died there."

"She died in Tia Juana," I said.

"How d'you know?"

"Oh, he'd know," said Jessup. "He was always her private parson. Remember?"

"All but Cork and Garford snickered at this, and I would have answered hotly, but Cork's harsh voice was prodding into a new inquiry.

"If Blanche Snell is getting everything," he said, "and she's half gone in the head like she used to be, she'll have to have a guardian appointed or something."

"A TRUSTEE, yes," said Garford.

"And I can guess who'll be it."

"I shall serve as trustee," Garford announced.

"Sure—sure——"

"Wait, Jim," Kurbisch interfered. "If she takes the whole pot, what difference? What good was it, anyhow, dragging us into this will business?" he asked Garford. "Just some honorable mention, huh?"

"Not at all. Without you gentlemen, I doubt if the estate could be liquidated."

"How so?"

"Well, the assets are a bit obscure," Garford replied. "Snell has only this property, and it is mortgaged. He left no stocks or other securities, and very little cash over and above the costs of his last weeks of illness and the expenses of the funeral."

FOR a moment this astonishing declaration left them speechless. And then Cork burst out: "So he hadn't no cash, huh? Like hell he hadn't!"

"Recent demands upon him, with nothing more coming in, depleted——" Garford began.

"Demands from who?" Jessup exclaimed.

"From him!" Cork pointed an accusing finger at Garford. "He's grabbed it all, like I told you——"

"Why," said Kurbisch, "are the assets what you call obscure, if you got the whole estate in your pocket?"

"Certain information which Snell had," Garford announced very deliberately, "represents the bulk of the estate."

He plainly relished tormenting them; and they became more perplexed and profane. Yet also it seemed to me that Garford was more alert, more taut, as if he anticipated an attack.

Just then the door of Snell's parlor swung slowly open, and Blanche, the daughter, who would inherit whatever it was that he had to bequeath, came into the room. I had not seen her for several years, and found her appearance incredibly altered. She was still haggard, she looked much older than the twenty-seven I knew her to be; yet no longer was she thin and frail. In an ill-fitting black dress she seemed almost robust. I remembered her as weak and frightened, a pitiable object. But now as she came among us there was a kind of vigor about her, and a strange and baffling stolidity.

At sixteen, and shortly after the death of her mother, whom she adored, Blanche had experienced an encounter at Snell's own road-house which ever afterward had clouded her mind. Hysteria was followed by epileptic seizures; and then, after a few niggardly and futile attempts to have her restored in health, Alonzo Snell had allowed the girl to be committed to an asylum.

It was only then that some of us grasped the complete perfidy of the man. Carrie Snell, older half-sister of Blanche, who often before had denounced him very bitterly, soon took her final departure from the scenes made hideous by her father's evil enterprises.

"MISS SNELL, you were to remain in your room," Garford said reprovingly.

"I waited long enough," she returned.

With a glance she observed the motley gathering that we were, but she greeted no one. In her left hand she carried a small brass cage, imprisoning a bright and vivacious canary.

"But really—when we are in conference——" Garford persisted.

Her eyes had a dangerous momentary gleam as she turned to look at him.

"Joey belongs in this room," she said. "My father said to bring the cage back in here just as soon as I could after he'd been carried out and buried."

The rather grisly foresight her announcement described did not seem to move her.

"Hello, Blanche," said Burney with forced and offensive jocularity. "Lemme open a window and let in some light for the birdie."

"No!" she answered. "*No!*"

She was so emphatic about it that I wondered whether this also was a dying injunction of Snell's, who might have wished his affairs discussed in the bad light they probably deserved.

Blanche was putting the bird cage down upon an old-fashioned, carved walnut table that stood close beside an antique ebony desk against the wall. Then she stepped back, hesitating.

"You had better go back to your room now," Garford suggested.

"I'll stay," she said.

"But——"

"I wish to stay."

"Sure," said Cork, "leave her stay. Why not?"

Garford clearly resented the interference and started to argue. But a disapproving uproar silenced him.

"Listen," said Kurbisch as spokesman, "you concentrate, Duke, on telling us what happened to Snell's money."

"IT WAS spent," said Blanche in her curiously flat tone. "Spent! But the will leaves me everything else, so he says. That's why you had to meet here."

"Everything else?" Kurbisch questioned. "What else is there, girlie?"

"Tell them about it," she said to Garford. "Why don't you?"

It seemed that Garford was somewhat less at ease now that Blanche confronted him. Moreover, the others' growing animosity was not a thing to soothe the nerves. I thought his hand a trifle unsteady as he took a folded document from an inside coat-pocket. Despite the dimness of the room he appeared able to read it. Presently he looked up and spoke.

"Snell expected to derive at least one hundred and thirty thousand dollars from a number of affidavits which he had made himself or obtained from others. I have never seen them," he explained, "and I didn't know of their existence until he died and this rough draft of his will came into my hands. The affidavits, it informs me, are concealed somewhere in this house."

"What could make them worth so much?"

"What've they got to do with us?"

"They are devised to enable the executor of the estate to claim certain cash rewards."

"Rewards! From who?"

"From the authorities or from interested private individuals and organizations that offered them."

"For what?" Cork demanded.

"I'll tell you."

Garford affected to consult the paper again, but this part I was sure he had memorized. And I noted that Blanche Snell waited now with perceptible impatience. Her granite composure was breaking up, though she did not seem afraid.

"FOR information," Garford resumed, clearing his throat, "leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons responsible for the murder of Charles and Agnes Ransom—May, 1926. The rewards in this case total thirty thousand dollars. And I think you will agree with me," he added pointedly, "that they are collectable upon delivery dead or alive.

"To continue—February, 1925: for information relating to the disappearance of Max Bondy, ten thousand dollars! And again, in August, 1928, the supposedly accidental death of Manuel Gaston provides five thousand dollars to any one revealing the true circumstances of the *accident*."

Here Mort Jessup gulped noisily; and Garford looked up from his pretended reading with a bland imitation of surprise.

"Shall I go on, gentlemen?" he inquired.

And Blanche said: "Yes," very eagerly.

"The Snell estate comprises full details and confessions relating to the aforesaid mysteries, and also regarding that plot which resulted in the shooting of Arthur Strong in March, 1927. Reward for the killers—dead or alive—twenty-five thousand dollars.

"Yet another—the celebrated kidnaping of little Louis Sardo, resulting in the boy's death, June, 1926. Rewards from all sources and never withdrawn—fifty-five thousand dollars. The supposed suicide, October, 1927, of Marion Palmer—five thousand——"

"My God!" Zim Kurbisch choked. "It's come!"

"The total, as you see," said Garford, "realizes Mr. Snell's expectation of one hundred and thirty thousand. As executor, however, I feel in duty bound to obtain more if I can," he added, repeating significantly: "If I can!"

"HOW much more?" Blanche Snell asked him.

Garford regarded her with undiminished annoyance. But she asked again and again, till he said curtly: "Oh, possibly twice as much."

"More crimes?"

"More generous offers," said Garford.

"From us, huh?" Cork exclaimed.

"You are very acute, sir."

"How much is it you're asking?"

"Twice one thirty—two hundred

and sixty thousand. I'll say a round quarter million—cash—and no delays."

"Where's the affidavits?" Kurbisch questioned.

"First," said Garford, "you select one of your number to go for the money. The rest remain as guests—I dislike the word hostages, it implies physical restraint, whereas yours, gentlemen, is wholly mental. Am I right? When your emissary returns," he continued, "all the evidence bequeathed by the late Alonzo Snell will pass to you, as the higher bidders."

"And how long d'you think it might take to sponge up a mere handful like two hundred and fifty grand?" Burney jeered.

"That, fortunately, is not one of my more pressing concerns," Garford responded.

"Oh, ain't it?" Cork flared. "Say, listen—I'm taking charge now."

"You are?"

"I am," said Cork. "You've squawked about all Snell's papers being hid in this house. Well, what does that make you, huh? Me and these here other guys—we ain't so dumb as Snell and you expected. See? I'm in the house and they're in the house. They're going to help me find the gold-plated affidavits—if we even have to take the place apart and scrape it."

"YOU'LL never find them, I assure you," Garford said very evenly.

"Then you do know where Snell left 'em?"

Cork appeared ready and eager to put his hands on Garford's throat and choke the information from him.

"And if I do? In your elegant phrase—what does that make *you?* Would I be so stupid as to risk facing mugs of your stripe, and not hold this trump?"

He laughed, though Cork advanced upon him threateningly. I thought the moment of battle had come. But Cork only reached out and snatched away the paper Garford held in his hand. Quickly he scanned it, and then shook the room with his wrath.

"Just a wise baby—playing wit' us, huh?" he roared.

THE paper, I could see as he let it fall in disgust, was blank.

"I memorized it," said Garford, unperturbed. "I wasn't fool enough to carry round with me that kind of dynamite." He smiled, adding: "It might break my market."

"You still think you can make us pay through the nose?" said Neilson, hitherto characteristically silent. He stalked over and stopped at the door.

"Where you going?"

"No place, Jim. But I'm just figuring to keep the wise Duke right here so long as we may need him. He don't seem to understand the way it lays. Get me?"

"Huh?"

"Why, men, he can't do nothing to us till long, long after we finish with him!"

This thought revived them.

"That's telling 'em!" said Burney.

"Our turn, eh?" Jessup chuckled.

"How do we begin?" Kurbisch, much restored in spirit, invited our bids like an auctioneer. "The Duke's been trying to money-or-your-life us. I say we split whatever he's already grabbed off o' Snell. Then we should make him help us search this house, till we find all his gold mines of bad news and information."

"But, Zim, he admits he knows where to find Snell's papers. We can persuade him to tell the truth, whether they're in this house or a bank vault or wherever they are. I say—coax him!" Burney leered.

Cork spoke:

"I say, kill him! He knows where the stuff's hid. What of it? He dies—what he knows dies, too."

Despite his professional insouciance, "Duke" Garford had to retreat a step before Cork's cold ferocity. And now I was certain that they would kill him. Leadership was all they needed, and in circumstances like these Cork could be a leader of unimaginable recklessness. Garford no doubt had fancied that the threat of the hidden affidavits would insure his life. Perhaps if he died the incriminating documents would turn up in the hands of the police. But that would be to-morrow—a day's start! Cork and these others were living only to-day, this hour, this single desperate moment. Cornered rats, with more than rats' teeth!

However, Blanche Snell stood facing them. She was Garford's insurance. She seemed eager to save him, fearful he would not survive. Later I understood her curious motive.

"Wait—listen!" she urged. "I can help you. No rough stuff! Didn't you all get those letters from my father? . . . Well, they tell you how to find what he hid. Sure! You begin alphabetically. Each letter had something written on the back of it in pencil. Didn't you notice?"

"Yes," I said, producing mine.

Garford, danger passed, now wanted to interfere. I was sure of it. But he dared not. And the others were hesitating distrustfully.

"Go ahead," said Blanche.

She was the unknown quantity; she baffled them. And she was trembling with her overwhelming eagerness.

Looking at me, she spoke my name.

"Ashton, you are first in the alphabet. Go ahead! What's penciled on your letter?"

"*Teak,*" I said.

"What?" they queried.

"Teak—teak. The wood. T-e-a-k."

"What's wood got to do with it?"

"Wait and see," said Blanche. "Who is next?"

"I guess I am. Burney."

"Yes."

"Mine's *box*—b-o-x," said Jeff, smirking.

"There—you see? Teak box. Next?"

"I'm next," Cork reported mildly. "My letter has *in* and then *parlor.*"

"This room!"

"Go on, Mort, you're next!" Burney exclaimed.

THE game was beginning to excite them, as Snell no doubt had meant that it should.

Jessup regarded his letter distastefully.

"*Back of,*" he read. "Just *back of.*"

" 'Teak box in parlor back of old ebony,' " Kurbisch supplied with gusto. "See—mine's *old ebony!* Old ebony what?"

"There!" Neilson was pointing. "*Desk,*" said he. "Mine is *desk.*"

They would have turned and charged upon the solid-looking antique, but Blanche halted them.

"I got the last letter," she declared. "S for Snell. My words are *top drawer.* Teak box in parlor back of old ebony desk top drawer!"

"It obviously doesn't make sense," Garford ventured to complain.

"Shut up!"

"Bust open that top drawer! Look behind it."

"Something secret in a box!"

Though they were fairly clawing at the old desk, the drawer in question was securely locked and would not yield to a furious tugging.

"Get the key. The Duke ought to have it——"

"Key—hell! Gimme room and I'll pry it!"

"Stop!" Garford, who might now have made his escape, was shouting at them.

None heeded him. I looked for Blanche. She had moved over to stand by the table and was staring intently, not at the group before the desk, but at the canary in its cage.

I stepped nearer to watch Cork, who was meeting with uncommon resistance from the antique lock.

"Gimme elbow room, can't you?"

"Sure, Jim——"

"Poor little birdling!" I heard Blanche Snell saying over and over, with amazing irrelevance considering her former interest in their project. "Poor, poor little Joey."

Snap! went the lock. The top drawer was pulled out, its nondescript contents dumped on the floor, hastily scanned, and kicked aside.

"See—in there's the box!"

"I got it!"

An oddly carved, oblong teak box about the size of a metal despatch case came forth in Cork's great paw. How characteristic of Snell it seemed to have planted this menacing object so mysteriously! Even the suave, resourceful Garford found its disclosure too much for his curiosity.

HE CROWDED forward, and so did I. But now I felt a small hand steal into mine; I felt its compelling pressure, and turned to discover Blanche Snell standing close to me. Yet she was not looking at me. I followed her gaze and saw the canary in the cage fluttering weakly, swaying, falling. Then the little bird lay still.

Blanche motioned to me to come with her, moving toward the door. The fate of Joey didn't seem to have dismayed her; no regret showed in her face. In fact, she appeared glad, triumphant. Only a sense of enormous relief would explain that serene expression.

Behind us, as we reached the door, they were exclaiming over the contents of the box, which had not long resisted Cork's rough invasion. Blanche very quietly slipped the key from the lock, and as quietly opened the door half way.

We passed through, and she shut it at once. I had passed, waiting for her, wondering at her stealth. I could hear a harsh jangle of disputing voices; and then Kurbisch began to cough and complain with strangled vehemence.

Blanche with peculiar intensity inserted the key and locked the door.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"You will see."

"What're you going to do?"

"I have remembered you—isn't that enough?"

"I don't understand."

"You were kind to Carrie always. She used to tell me. For her sake, I decided to spare you."

"From what?"

"From going to hell with them."

"I WAS never one of them," I declared. "But I could've held my own in there."

"You're armed?"

"Yes." I showed her a bulging coat pocket.

"Good!" said she. The smile of this woman, not, as I feared, restored to perfect sanity, was no pleasant thing to behold. "They are bound to die."

Thus suddenly I began to know her purpose. I listened. The voices within the parlor were quieter, were strangely muffled, and a kind of agonized murmur beat upon my ears. Somebody now started to pound on the door which Blanche had locked, and a voice began calling—Garford's voice, I thought—demanding, pleading, that the door be thrown open.

The pounding for a moment was terrific. If they broke out and seized us after this—then what? Not knowing all of her plan, I could only prepare to make what stand I could. I drew my automatic.

Blanche was down on her knees, frantically pulling at the rug in the hall and carefully placing it to block the narrow space above the sill.

"Don't shoot through that door," she warned me sharply. "Here—give me the gun!"

As I hesitated, vaguely terrified and remonstrating, she had scrambled to her feet and seized the weapon from my hand.

"When they get out——" I began to argue.

"They won't," she said.

"What's happening to them?"

"DISCIPLINE," said Blanche. "Come along now—let's go outside."

I followed her, still protesting.

"Maybe the door will hold, but those windows can be broken——"

"It was all prepared far in advance," she said. "The windows are tightly fastened. That one—Burney, was it?—he would have found out if he had tried to open any of them—you remember—when I brought in Joey."

"Your pet?" I said foolishly.

I found it difficult to talk to this strange, vindictive woman. Automatic in hand, she stood before the door of the house, a self-appointed sentinel forbidding me to re-enter.

"Joey belonged to my father. You are surprised, of course, but the Alonzo Snell you knew was not the man who lay upstairs there, dying by inches."

"He suffered, then?"

"Fearfully. It was cancer," she said, adding in a hard tone: "Cancer—and Garford."

What about Garford?"

"We are done with that ——" Her description was quite unprintable. The virulent outburst left her confused; and then she explained rather defiantly: "That's what my father called him—but not to his face."

"It would appear he hated him, but also was afraid of him."

"I'LL tell you about it," she blurted out. "When my father was really taken sick, Garford heard of it and wrote him. They'd never been intimate—not in any way; but after several letters, Garford came here to see him.

"At first he was very kind, and my father seemed to like him. I—I liked him, too. You see, I was just beginning to feel better. I had been home from the—the sanitarium for about a year."

I could not offer any suitable comment, so I waited for her to resume. Presently she did.

"But Garford was the worst, truly, of all the men my father had ever had dealings with. He soon began to change and show how he really felt toward us after he had gotten a foothold. They'd talked together a great deal, and I suppose my father, being weak and sick, spoke too freely. He let Garford pump him.

"Anyhow, he just moved in and soon was bossing everybody. He kept threatening us and getting money from my father. Then there were these others." Her gesture indicated the dangerous crew she had locked in the parlor. "My father knew them. He said they'd come down like vultures the moment he was dead and never let me alone if he'd willed me his money. And so, lying up there in terrible pain, he worked out this plan to cause them to destroy one another."

"But why," I asked, "did Snell extend his grudge to me?"

"Perhaps because you took Carrie's part against him. He never forgave her for being independent. Or perhaps," she added in a level tone, "he thought I'd need some one like you here to champion me."

"And I will—I want to, if you'll tell me how I can. But let's hurry away from this place!" I exclaimed, admitting my dread.

"There's no one to fear but me. See here—I'll show you." She led me to a shuttered window of the parlor and, stooping, peered in between the slats. "You can see them," she invited.

I PUT my head close to hers and looked in, and what I discerned of the dim interior printed a thing of indelible horror forever upon my mind.

Garford was plainly visible where he knelt against the door that barred escape. The others—Cork, Burney, Kurbisch—were variously crouched and contorted on the floor between the ravished desk and that hopeless exit. Jessup lay in a heap by the table, evidently as dead as the bird in the cage just above him. I could see of Neilson only his legs asprawl, and from his position assumed that he had perished while trying to get to a window.

"All dead," Blanche assured me. "What do you say to that?"

The sight within had sickened me. I could not speak. But whatever her frightful triumph was, it made Blanche extraordinarily loquacious, and she fairly chattered with excitement as she led me thunderstruck away from the window.

"We mustn't stay here. I only left this one slat loose, so that it would turn and give a view of the room. Pandora, you see. But there's bound to be some leakage of the gas. It was just a small sort of tank with a valve, hidden in the back of the second drawer of the old ebony desk. Pulling out the top drawer made the valve open wide.

"Then there was the heavy perfume of the funeral flowers, you remember, which kept them unaware of any danger till the last moment, when it was too late. That was why my father told me to carry in the bird. Joey would be done for the instant he got a whiff. His falling over was my signal to get right out of the room.

"MY FATHER planned and arranged it, though he was able to work at it only a little at a time, late at night while his strength lasted or when Garford was occasionally away from the house. Garford believed in the affidavits, of course. My father had knowledge of all those crimes, but he knew better than ever to have admitted anything of the sort under oath. He thought of it at first, wanting to leave a big scare behind him which would safeguard me.

"However, it was Garford who hinted that Cork and the others should be killed, since they're worth as much dead as alive. Garford never suspected, but we just included him with them. He helped my father work out the idea of the will. He actually was left executor, you see—and last night with my father lying dead in there he came and threatened me and struck me——"

"Stop!" I urged her.

"Oh, I don't mind telling it—

now," she insisted. "He told me he might have to marry me to get the money he was going to collect for my inheritance here to-day. We'd go on a trip then—after I had made a will in his favor. He knew that I would understand he meant to kill me.

"But instead, see how we got him—my father and I. That room in there's like a bank vault, deadly with the gas, but reserving one hundred and thirty thousand dollars' worth of extinguished crookedness. Not to speak of what Garford might bring in, if all his slick crimes could be sold for cash——"

"Please stop," I begged.

"What's the matter? Do you imagine you got a whiff of that stuff?" She took a black-bordered wisp of handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and held it out to me. "This is the name of the gas he used—got it through a friend who handles a lot of chemicals and bootleg alcohol. See—I wrote it down."

FAINTLY scrawled in purple penciling on the linen I read: Chloroformiat of trichloromethyl.

"It's a suffocating gas of terrific power," she recited, parrot-like. "Not particularly painful in such concentration. Easier for them than the electric chair."

Then she caught my expression and paused, her almost hysterical jubilation passing as swiftly as it had come.

"But it's murder, isn't it? I know what you're thinking," she said after a moment. "Snell's own daughter——"

"No—no," I lied quickly, seeing how the very words she spoke seemed to wring her. "But—but what shall we do? What about that queer, swarthy woman, the servant?"

"I forgot her!" There was all the shrill despair of recurring insanity in her laugh. "She was Garford's watch-dog. He brought her here, the dirty——"

"How much does she know? What will she tell?"

"Nothing—everything. But you—do you want to turn me over to the police? Or just let Nature take its course? . . . Don't mistake my meaning, Ashton. I can't charm you. I'm not Carrie. I—I've never made love in my life——"

She faltered and her voice broke. Tears were coursing down her cheeks, and for the first time I noticed the make-up which she had very crudely applied. Unsteadily she began moving toward the front door.

I PUT out a hand to detain her.

"No! You mustn't go back in there!" I cried. "You're mad!"

At that word her eyes blazed.

"That's it—that's it! Crazy again! Mad—cured—mad! What a cure—from half-wit to murderess—*Snell's daughter.*"

I tried to quiet her, to apologize.

"Keep back! I don't hate *you*," she said, a sudden new crispness in her tone. She had clung all the while to my revolver, and she leveled it now to prove her resolution. "Birds of a feather! I belong with that bad bunch in the funeral parlor, don't I?" she jeered. "Carrion, dead or alive!"

"No—no!"

"Hurry! Run! Call your police!"

Incoherent, raving, she eluded me and rushed past, into the house of death, slamming shut the door.

I sprang after her in close pursuit, and dragged at the knob. I swung the door open. She had vanished, but I suspected her final errand, and, trying not to breathe as I passed by the parlor, I hurried along the hall, through an uninviting dining-room, and came to a narrow rancid-smelling pantry.

There was the kitchen, its door slightly ajar. A startled screech, and then a loud report crashed and echoed just inside. Acrid fumes of gunpowder mingled with the all-pervading odor of the funeral flowers. I forced myself to enter.

BLANCHE SNELL stood over a huddled form in a drab black dress. A mutilated temple oozed horribly.

"Why did you kill her?" I questioned, but only because Blanche, staring fixedly, seemed to demand that I accuse her.

"I killed Garford. She was his right hand. It was only decent to cut it off." Her maniacal impulses had ebbed; yet I seemed to hear Snell's voice and that dry and sinister relish of his in horrible things. "You had better go now. I want you to go, Ashton," she added. "I'll attend to everything according to my father's dying wish. There's a pit in the cellar—plenty of quicklime—in bags marked *cement.*"

Desperation and horror seized me. Once, years before, I had felt so, standing before a judge who in another moment would pronounce sentence upon me as a first offender for a crime I had not committed. Only after my release did I learn how Snell and others contrived to frame me for that infamous disaster. At the bar of justice I had stood helpless, handcuffed. But now I was unfettered and charged only with fear. I pleaded guilty to that.

"Go! Get out of here!" she commanded harshly.

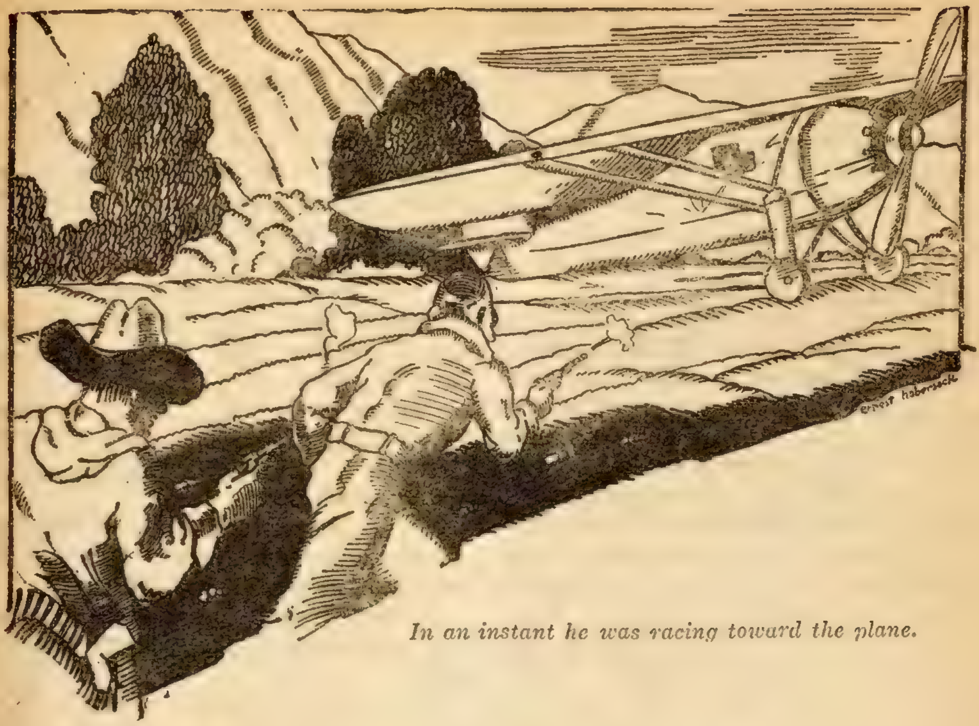
I looked about me—a ghostly dwelling place, indeed, where only the malignity of one man's life survived him! I went from the room, leaving her alone.

Not the woman but terror itself was that which turned me out of Snell's house, and terror drove me on. I began to run, and ran and ran and never looked back till long after I had left it and all that it held far behind.

Walking in Circles

WHY do people lost in darkness or in a jungle walk in circles?

Because ninety per cent of the human race have one leg longer than the other, and at each step take a longer stride with the longer leg, which naturally leads them to the right or the left of a circle.



In an instant he was racing toward the plane.

The Midnight Mail

By BOB DU SOE

A cold half-million in currency is sufficient to start all kinds of mischief, as Speed Weaver discovered when he suddenly became involved in "money troubles" which were more thrilling than all his midnight hops from Oakland to Los Angeles put together.

AT EXACTLY twelve midnight, Speed Weaver climbed into the cockpit of his plane and pulled on his helmet. The mechanic had announced the ship ready to go, and the mail bags were aboard. Speed gave the signal to jerk out the chocks, then gunned his motor. With the tail held down, and the slip-stream churning the dust, he took off. A few minutes later he was roaring southward with the lights of Oakland twinkling far below.

Six days out of seven, fifty-two weeks in the year, in rain, fog, or moonlight, the mail went through. While Speed was flying south, another plane was droning north, and the next night the flight was reversed. They never met, these emissaries of Uncle Sam, though occasionally they caught a glimpse of each other's exhaust as they passed in the night. Speed had learned that his fellow-worker was inclined to be wild, and that his name was Barrett, but that was all.

The trip south was by far the more agreeable, in Speed's opinion. It was almost enjoyable. From the lower end of the great valley of the San Joaquin, over the ridge and down the San Fernando, it was one long joy-hop. There was always the sunrise over the Sierras, the ranger's greeting from the crest of old Breckenridge, and then the glamorous, world-famed Hollywood. What a vast gulf, he often thought, between that lonesome cabin of the ranger on the mountain and the rows of fantastic bungalows in the city! And yet, as he roared through the clear morning sky, the one was little more than out of sight before he glimpsed the other.

SPEED dug into his pocket, as he neared the ridge on this particular morning, and pulled out an edition of the evening newspaper. It contained an account of the latest New York to Europe flight, and it occurred to him that the ranger might find it interesting. He rolled it tight, and, nosing down over the little meadow, waited for the tall young man to emerge from his cabin. That was all Speed had been able to judge of him: that he was tall, slender, young, and blond.

The ranger appeared the next moment, waving his hat, and Speed tossed the newspaper. He saw the man clasp his hands above his head in a long-distance hand-shake, and knew that the little thing he had done was more than appreciated. Give the lonesome devil something to think about, he mused. By the time Speed had regained his lost altitude, the city of papier-mâché and make-believe had begun to take form on the distant horizon. Another ten minutes, and this landmark too had dropped astern, and he was peering down at the windsock over the southern drome.

"Good morning, Weaver," the super greeted him, as he stomped into the field office.

"Mornin', Smitty," Speed returned. "What are you doing on the job this time of day? Where's that sleepy clerk?"

The super evaded the question by putting one of his own: "How was the weather on the way down?"

"Finer than frog hair. But that's not answering my question. What's up?"

"It's none of your damn' business." Superintendent Smith finished checking the bags. "Seeing it's you, though, Speed, I'll tell you. The clerk got a night off, and I'm waiting for Barrett to ring back from Oakland."

"H'M, that's a new one. He must have had the old crate loaded with diamonds."

"No, but he did have a cold half-million in currency, and the inspector got the idea somewhere that we ought to be on the job in case anything went wrong."

"What gave him a hunch like that?"

"Search me. You can never tell what he's thinking about."

"Well, you ought to be getting a ring any minute. There was no fog when I left, and the dope sheet said there wouldn't be any."

"How was it over the ridge?"

"All right this morning. But why this sudden interest in the weather? Good Lord, Smitty, I've seen you send men up in fog that was thicker than soup."

Superintendent Smith was a short, heavy-set man, inclined to bluster when it could be gotten away with. On this occasion, however, he seemed a bit uneasy.

"I never sent anybody up who didn't want to go," he protested. "If I was that kind of a bird, I wouldn't be worrying about Barrett now."

"Well, what is there to worry about? Barrett's been flying the north-bound mail ever since it was started."

"Yes, and since the day he started I've never seen him make such a rotten take-off."

"Rotten? How so?"

"I don't know. He just wobbled all over the field."

"ARE you sure that half-million wasn't in silver? Sounds like his tail might have been heavy."

"No, he didn't have any load. I put the bags on board myself."

"What did the mechanic say?"

"Said he couldn't figure it out. The motor was O. K., and he saw Barrett wiggle the controls just before he pulled the chocks."

"Well, there couldn't have been anything wrong then, or he'd have come back. Forget it; they're a dopy gang up there, anyway. They'll ring when they happen to think of it."

A half-hour passed, however, and there was no ring. Three-quarters, and the super was thoroughly alarmed. Even Speed could think of no plausible reason why his team-mate had not made the northern drome by that time.

"I'll call 'em myself," the super declared, but before he could fully make up his mind the telephone rang.

Speed listened to the conversation. It was Oakland talking, but the relief he got from that knowledge was short-lived. Barrett had not arrived, and the northern super was worried, also.

Smith hung up the receiver with an oath.

"I knew it, damn it! I felt it in my bones!"

"You and the inspector both," Speed retorted. "You put a hoodoo on the poor devil."

"Hoodoo nothing! I knew there was something wrong from the take-off. They're sending a plane down as far as Hanford, and I told them I'd send one north. You'd better take it, Weaver. You know the route."

SPEED needed no urging.

"Sure, I'll go. He's probably down in the mountains somewhere. If he'd cracked up along the valley, we would have heard of it by this time."

"Damn the luck, anyway! The one time when we wanted to make a showing. I wonder——"

Speed did not wait for him to finish. He was wondering, too, but he did not want to talk about it. He hurried across to the hangar and helped the mechanic get his plane gassed up and out onto the field. When he had squirmed into the harness of his chute, he climbed to the cockpit and opened the throttle. The motor was still warm, and needed no rivving. He signaled the mechanic to remove the chocks, and with a roar the plane zoomed skyward.

It was the first time that Speed had traveled the route by daylight, and for a moment the seriousness of his mission was forgotten. It would be a relief, when he got over the ridge, to steer his course by an occasional glimpse below instead of relying upon uncertain lights and the compass. A blamed lonesome job, bat-flying. Worse than a night watchman wandering through a deserted warehouse.

Hollywood again, he mused. Funny place, that: all front and no back. Strobe, the clerk, lived there somewhere—a queer, inconsistent sort of fellow, too. Big ideas with nothing to back them up. Some one had said recently that he was learning to fly.

SAN FERNANDO was next, and then Speed eased back a little on the stick in order to hop the ridge. He watched the ground more closely now. The mountain slopes were thickly wooded, and there were a score of deep ravines where a cracked-up plane would be difficult to locate — especially if it had burned. The thought sent an unpleasant shudder up his spine.

There was no sign of a crash on the southern slope, and Speed was relieved. Through force of habit he nosed down as he neared the meadow on the mountain-top, but he did not look for the usual greeting. The ranger would not be expecting him at this time of day. He was probably away somewhere on his rounds.

But in this last surmise Speed was mistaken. As he roared over the cabin, the ranger ran out from the fringe of trees that bordered the meadow and waved his arms. Not the customary friendly gesture, but excitedly, pointing back toward the woods as he ran.

"That means he's found the crash!" Speed muttered aloud. But there was nothing joyful in the way he said it. He had been hoping that the whole thing would turn out to be a false alarm—that he would land at Hanford and find that Barrett was safe.

Banking sharply, he turned and headed back. When the meadow lay squarely in front of him, he cut the gun and eased the plane toward the ground. He fish-tailed to cut his speed, then pulled back the stick and let her settle. The ship bumped a few times over the uneven ground and rolled to a stop. Before he shut off the engine Speed taxied around to be ready for the take-off. He climbed down from the cockpit then, and hurried forward to meet the ranger.

"If you are looking for a smashed-up plane, I've just found it!" the young fellow exclaimed, a bit out of breath. "Saw the smoke from the tower!"

SPEED knew from the word "smoke" that he could expect the worst.

"Burned," he said resignedly.

The ranger nodded.

"Nothing left but a skeleton and the engine. The fire has been out some time—barely smoldering."

They were opposite the cabin, and Speed wiggled out of his chute.

"Another good man gone west," he muttered. "I'd rather not go near him, but I guess I'll have to."

The ranger headed in through the woods, and, leaving his chute in front of the cabin, Speed followed him. It was rough going for a half-mile or so, but the trees thinned after that and the slope was more gradual. Another half-mile, and the ranger pointed out the charred wreckage, a few feet from the edge of a steep ravine.

Speed stood a moment gazing at the awesome spectacle, and then he walked slowly around it. The stump of one of the props caught his attention, and he frowned. Stepping closer, he examined the other blade. It had burned some, too, but it had not been broken. The radiator was warped and a hopeless ruin, but not the twisted, battered mass it would have been had the heavy engine ground it against the rocks in a crash. It was evident that the plane had landed right side up, and he could not understand in that case what had caused it to burn—or, at least, why Barrett had not made some effort to save himself. The location of his stark remains proved that he had died in the cockpit.

"WHAT do you suppose could have happened?" the ranger inquired.

"Lord only knows. I'm trying to think. He didn't crash, and yet he didn't have time to get clear."

"Was there any one with him?"

"No, I'm sure there wasn't. If there had been, the super would have said so."

The ranger looked puzzled.

"Then some one must have gotten here ahead of me, though I can't understand who it could have been or where he came from."

"What makes you think that? How could any one have climbed away up here since daylight?"

"Hunters: that's the only answer I can give, though I haven't heard any shooting or seen any campfires."

"What makes you so sure there was somebody here?"

"The tracks. Look at the grass. Look at the ground there where it's kicked up."

Speed was no woodsman, nor a detective, either, but he did not have to be to see what the ranger meant. The wilted grass was trampled in a half-dozen places, and there were fresh heel-prints in the soft gravel.

"They couldn't be your own tracks?" he suggested.

The ranger smiled and shook his head.

"I noticed them the first thing, but I didn't think much about it because I figured there were two in the plane instead of only this one."

"If you should ask me," Speed suddenly declared, "I'd say there was something damn' queer about it. When the ship left the drome it was carrying five hundred thousand dollars in currency."

The ranger whistled softly.

"Phew, some bonfire!"

"Yes, *if* the stuff is burned. There is only one thing for me to do, and that's to hop back and bring up the inspector."

"That's the best way, and while you're gone I'll keep watch from the tower."

When they reached the meadow again Speed hurried toward the cabin to pick up his chute. Half way there he whirled in his tracks with a startled oath. With a few sharp preliminary explosions, the motor of his ship had suddenly burst into a roar.

In an instant he was racing toward the plane. An automatic appeared over the edge of the cockpit and flashed twice. Speed felt a tug at his arm as a bullet ripped through his sleeve, but he did not stop. Another barked, and he saw that the ranger had returned the fire. The man in the cockpit changed his aim, and the automatic flashed again—once, twice, three times. The ship had begun to move, but Speed had gained the protection of a wing, and, ducking around it, he seized a strut. One more steel-tipped missile hissed past his ear, and then the firing abruptly ceased. The man at the controls had suddenly turned his attention to the moving plane.

He opened the throttle, and as the ship lurched forward Speed leaped up and caught hold of the cockpit-coaming. The slip-stream tore at his clothing and threatened to hurl him back, but somehow he held on. The sliding door to the freight pit was partly open, and, giving slight thought to the chance he was taking, he muscled up and thrust a leg through the opening.

The plane had left the gound, but he hung there a moment before he pulled the other leg after him, half expecting the tail to flop over his head. When they reached the edge of the meadow, he braced himself, ready to leap. It seemed impossible that the landing-gear could clear the tree-tops. He felt the ship give a lurch the next second, and held his breath. But the anticipated crash did not follow, and he realized that they had cleared—that they were in the air.

The man in the cockpit turned then, and his lips formed an oath. Speed gasped in amazement. It was Strobe, the clerk—Strobe, of all men! A jumble of thoughts raced through his mind as he stared into the mad, distorted face: the money; the poor take-off that Smitty had mentioned; the heel prints near the burned plane; and now the desperate theft of his own machine. One by one each incident dove-tailed perfectly with the next, and yet the conclusion seemed impossible.

STROBE grimaced angrily and jerked up the automatic. Before he could fire, however, a sudden dip of the plane recalled his attention to the controls. It was a matter that would not have troubled an experienced pilot, but it appeared to give him the utmost concern. Speed remembered the gossip at the dome: that Strobe would never make a good flyer; that he lacked something —air feel, they called it—that was so essential. Speed knew the type, and the thought was no more agreeable than a glimpse of the threatening gun.

Strobe decided to change his course when he had righted the ship, and that kept him busy a few minutes longer. Glancing down, Speed saw that he had turned and was headed south.

"Mexico," he decided, "and if he makes it the law will never reach him."

THE turn successfully accomplished, Strobe gunned the motor and began to climb. The presence of his unwelcome passenger seemed to have lost some of its importance. At three thousand feet he pulled the stick into neutral and leveled out.

Something under the cowl suddenly drew his attention then, and Speed saw him lean forward. A little later he caught the faint odor of gasoline, and knew that the clerk must have detected it, also. A hole in the tank, probably caused by one of the ranger's bullets.

Strobe straightened and glanced back, a look of mingled dread and rage on his drawn features. He wanted more than anything to keep going, to escape, and it must have taken considerable effort for him to make up his mind; but it was evident that he had decided to land. Whether to repair the leak or seek some other means of flight, Speed had no way of knowing. The edge of the Mojave Desert lay ahead of them, and Willow Springs, with Lancaster just beyond; and there were numerous places where the plane might stand for hours, even days, without being noticed.

As the ship nosed downward it became more apparent with every foot that Strobe knew little of what he was doing. He cut the motor, then gunned it again; increased his dive, then leveled out. The ground was fairly level, and the prospects of bringing the ship down on it should not have worried him, but Speed could see that he was hesitating. When he did muster courage for the final dive, he took it at an angle that was almost certain to end in a crash.

Speed swore at the stupidity of the man, and prepared to jump. Strobe, however, must have sensed the danger, also. Instead of closing the throttle, he opened it wide and shot skyward again. The sudden zoom nearly ended in a tail spin, and it was only in the nick of time that he jammed the stick forward and brought the plane on a level keel. When he had swallowed the lump in his throat, Speed muttered thanks to his guardian angel. He would have given all he possessed right then for the parachute which he had left in front of the ranger's cabin.

Strobe made one more desperate attempt to land, then lost his nerve entirely. Twisting about in the cockpit, he motioned frantically with the automatic for Speed to come forward and take the controls. For a moment Speed was of a mind to comply with his demand, and then he decided not to. In the air he had a chance. On the ground it would be but another case of a pilot's being burned to death, apparently while sitting calmly in his cockpit. No, his chance had come now. Strobe needed him, and for that reason it was doubtful that he would shoot.

"Damn you, do as I say!"

Speed read the words on the enraged man's lips, as readily as if they had been written; but Speed only shook his head.

Strobe pointed under the cowl and made himself ridiculous trying to drive the plane and at the same time explain the danger that Speed was already aware of. When the man whom he was threatening only nodded and grinned, he went out of his head completely. He raved and swore, and then he threw the automatic down into the bottom of the cockpit, and held up his hands. Anything to save his own wretched life.

THE display of emotion had no effect on Speed. He smiled grimly and let the terrified clerk continue his struggle with the ship. When the time came he would do something. Just what, he had not yet decided; but until then he was determined that Strobe should suffer to the utmost.

The moment he awaited, however, came sooner than he had expected. The engine sputtered, and for a breathless second there was no sound but the screech of wind through the struts. When it started again, Strobe was half way out of the cockpit. Speed too had started to climb out onto the fuselage, but at that instant his duty was suddenly made clear to him.

White with terror, a groveling weakling, Strobe made a final plea. In his unreasoning desperation, he snatched a package of currency from his pocket and held it out. When Speed shook his head, he pulled out another and still another. There is no telling what he would have done next, but at that moment the motor missed, sputtered a few times, and died.

Speed was out of the freight pit then, ready to leap. The ground was a scant two thousand feet below them. It was a matter of seconds, and then no amount of skill could possibly avoid the crash. As the plane nosed over, Strobe climbed down onto the wing. Would he jump in time? Even then Speed was gambling with one lone chance in a thousand. He opened his mouth to shout, but the words he meant to utter died on his tongue. With a scream, Strobe slipped from the wing and disappeared below.

In one mighty spring Speed threw himself into the cockpit and seized the stick. Ailerons—rudder—he worked frantically with them all, and then when it seemed inevitable that the whole frail structure would be dashed to bits, the ship suddenly leveled out and shot ahead less than a dozen feet above the ground. The next second the wheels touched and it rolled to a stop.

It was some time before Speed could bring himself to make a search for the battered, broken man who he knew lay not far away. It had to be done, though, and, climbing down from the cockpit, he followed the tracks of the wheels back over the sand. He found him, twisted and broken as he had expected, but still with a spark of life in him. Speed did what little he could to make him comfortable.

Strobe was not surprised when he opened his eyes and looked up. He seemed to take it as a matter of course.

"Shouldn't have taken your plane," he whispered hoarsely. "Didn't know enough about it."

"How did you get there—up on the mountain?" Speed asked.

"Hid in the fuselage. It was easy."

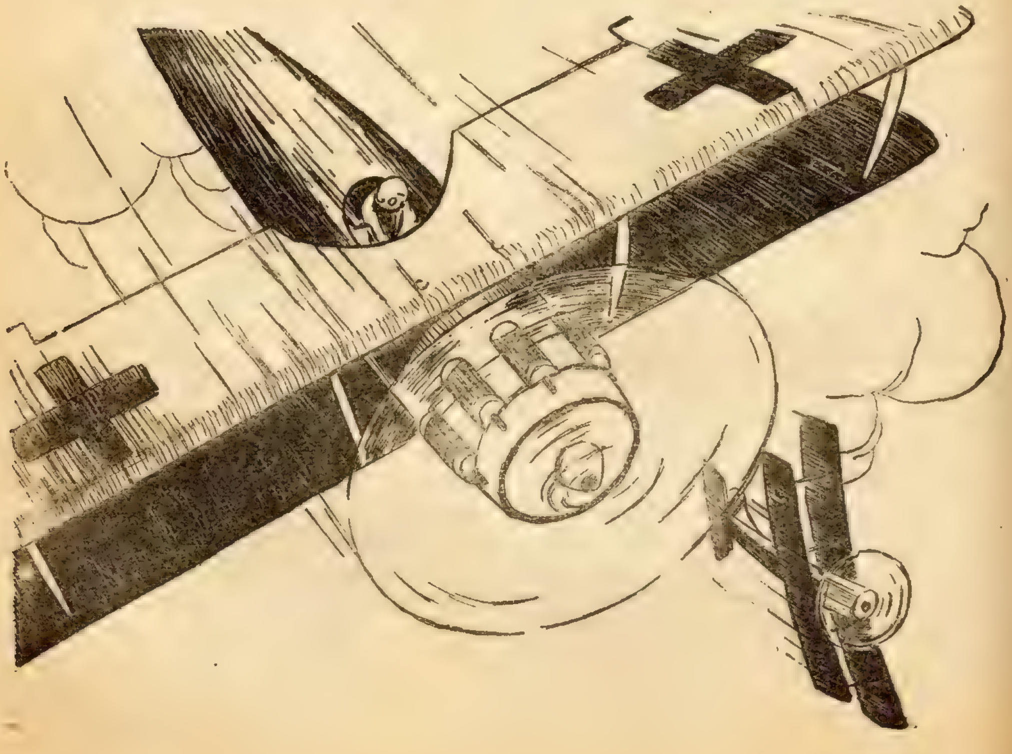
"And you bumped him off—Barrett?"

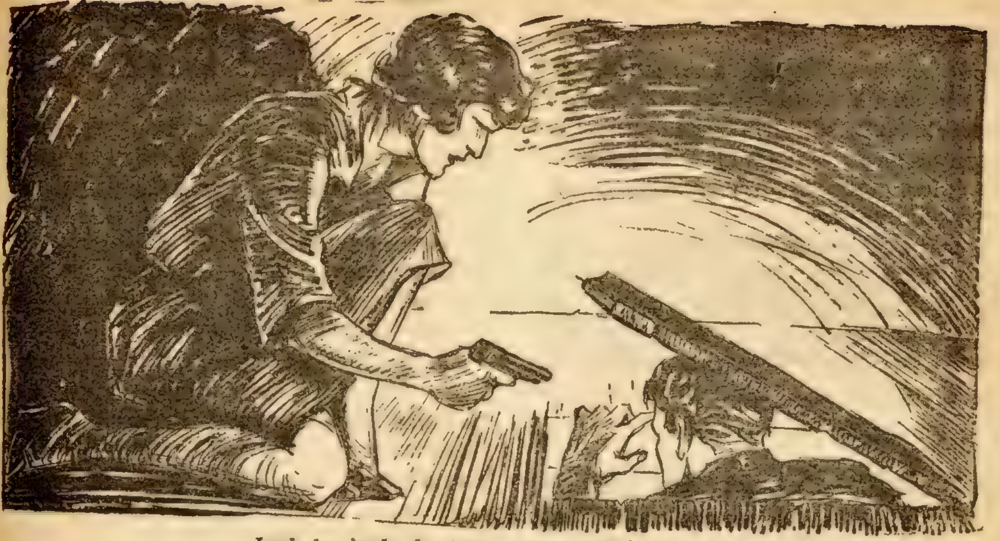
"Yeh, damn him! I'd have split with him—he wouldn't——"

"What did you do it for, Strobe?"

"I—I——" But the spark of life had vanished before he could answer.

"Just as well, I guess," Speed muttered, and, picking up the scattered packages of currency, he walked slowly back to his plane.





Inch by inch the trap came cautiously up.

Snoopy

By COLE RICHARDS

Marian Jessup believed that the old, frontier days of the "wild and woolly" West had passed, in Colorado. But when she went out to the Circle Z Ranch to recuperate from a case of nerves, things happened to change her mind about several things.

IN THE ten years between my graduation from college and my climb to manager of one of the largest hotels in Colorado Springs, no one ever called me snoopy. Long business training helped me to hold in check what is usually a woman's greatest vice—curiosity.

"But if any woman could go through that first day, Marian Jessup," I said to myself when the affair was over, "and not be snoopy, she's a creature extraordinary."

It was in the dining-room of the Circle Z ranch house, on a burning June day, that I first saw Carter, the caretaker. The Circle Z was used by a friend of mine for an occasional hunting trip or rodeo to entertain his acquaintances. Carter looked after a small herd of cattle and kept up the fences.

When a doctor had declared me nervously exhausted, with the tourist season just beginning, my friend had suggested the ranch for a month as the quickest method of recuperation.

I drove out by myself and arrived at the Circle Z late in the afternoon. The last few miles a shadow seemed to come over the plains. It was not the gloom that precedes a storm. It was, rather, a psychic shadow. An ominous air of fearful expectancy brooded over the plains, an air that worked so on my nerves that I roared full speed over the cow-paths and into the sandy ranch yard. After knocking at the door and getting no reply, I walked in. The doors of Colorado ranch houses are always open and the cupboards well filled.

I PASSED through the screened porch and the kitchen and into the dining-room. I had just time to notice the lounge in the vined bay window, the table and a few chairs. Also the telephone on the stand near the kitchen door. That telephone was to be an isle of safety for me. No matter how frightened I was, I could always lift the receiver and be sure that a second later eight other receivers would be lifted along the line and eight ears listen.

Suddenly a man appeared from an inner room. He was a long-faced man with a sullen mouth. In his gray shirt and black trousers and boots, he faded into the surrounding shadows. As he saw me, he asked, his voice taut with alarm:

"Where'd you come from?"

Although his sudden appearance had startled me, I replied coolly enough:

"From the Springs. I suppose you're Carter. I'm Marian Jessup. The owner has given me permission to stay here a month."

"Here?" he repeated, as if bewildered. "Here? A month?"

"Here a month," I said testily. "All I want is rest and quiet. I won't bother you. I can take excellent care of myself."

That last line seemed to strike him.

"I hope you can," he said grimly, and strode out of the house.

As the door banged behind him, the telephone rang. I waited a moment for him to come back, then answered.

"Hello, Carter," said a man, and before I had a chance to reply: "Oh, wrong number." The telephone clicked in my ear.

Again it rang. Again I answered. That time there was a silence, a surprised, breathless, wondering silence. Then very quietly the man hung up. The click of the telephone that time sent cold chills down my spine. The incident seemed to fit into the ominous air of fearful expectancy brooding over the plains.

"Just your nerves," I said as I went to unpack. But I was to learn soon that it was not all nerves.

THE dining-room and living-room were almost one. The bedroom opened off the living-room, and off the bedroom, in turn, was a small closet used as entrance to the attic stair. The bedroom was small and sparsely furnished.

Gazing into the mirror, which was marred by a long diagonal crack, I wondered what the plains sun would do to the white skin that accompanies auburn hair. I had always thought myself dainty and slender. But now I seemed a weakling, a blade of grass against the sweeping prairie wind.

"Oh, quit trying to make mystery and terror where there isn't any," I said to myself.

I had emptied my bag and my suitcase, and had changed to a cool green house-dress, when I heard hoof-beats on the road. With spurs and bits jingling, four riders turned into the ranch yard. I caught a glimpse of stetson hats, bright studded wristbands, and high boots. Always interested in the cowboys, I went to the back door for a closer look. As I got to the screened porch, I heard Carter say:

". . . take care of herself."

And a cold, slow voice said:

"If she goes snoopin', she'll need to."

Another that I recognized as the telephone voice added:

"If she's a woman, she'll snoop."

Followed a crackle of laughter.

CONSCIOUS of doing that very thing, I slipped back into the house, but not before I had catalogued the visitors. Their names I learned later. The cold, slow voice belonged to the eldest of the four. He was a gray, thin, stiff man called Gary. His partner, as stiff and thin, but with a slack to his lips, and veiled eyes, was Tad Danton. The others, one fat and red-faced, the other bent and worried, were Lynn and Jones. Their ranches were up the valley from Danton & Gary's Bar D. They talked a few minutes, then rode jinglingly away.

Later in the evening, Carter had another visitor. He hailed Carter in the yard. Receiving no answer, he banged open the screen door and walked in. He was a bronzed, merry young man in blue denim trousers, a red shirt, a broad brown belt, and high brown boots.

"Hey, Carter!" he called. Then he saw me standing in the dining-room. "Oh, didn't mean to walk in. Sorry." He slapped his stetson against his leg in sudden embarrassment. "I'm Barry Keith of the Lazy L. I'm a next-door neighbor. Mere matter of ten miles."

"I'm Marian Jessup, here for rest and quiet."

"Rest and quiet? Here?" It seemed he could not imagine such a connection.

"Yes." I was thoroughly aroused now. These vague allusions left me like a wanderer lost in a dim swamp. "Yes. Why not? Surely there are no cattle-rustlers or range wars now. I understand a fight about water and an occasional bootlegger covers all the trouble they have here."

He laughed nervously, as though he was thinking of something he did not want to tell.

"RIGHT at that. Even the bootleggers are scarce. The water is an argument with the Aquitania Dam people. They can't be persuaded we have any rights to the creek flowing through our own property. And while we persuade them the cattle die. Yes, bootleggers and the water cover it—just about." Again he slapped the stetson against his leg. Suddenly he turned and was gone.

Dusk came on, the dead, silent dusk of the plains. I sat in an easy chair in the living-room, with the yellow rays of the lamp shining mellow on the walnut table. I tried to read but could not shut out the eerie creep of the dusk. Unseen eyes were on me. Unseen hands reached for me.

"I'm alone," I whispered. "All alone."

Abruptly I stood up and blew out the light. The dark gave me a momentary sense of security. The security left me as I heard a soft sound as of something or some one in motion outside. Came a sigh, a scratching. Some one was creeping round the house, trying to get in. Again I heard the sigh. It was almost at the screen now — the unlocked screen. I was frozen by fear, too utterly terror-stricken to scream.

Came a brisk, noisy wind. The creeping scratch changed to a heavy brushing.

"The vines," I said aloud, in

heartfelt relief. I had heard the vines on the bay window in the dining-room moving in the evening breeze. I sank again into the chair.

"If your nerves are that overwrought, you do need a rest," I thought.

But I could not forget that there were no locks on the doors, and that I was ten miles from a neighbor and forty miles from a city or a policeman. Nothing would happen, of course. But if something did——

A smart rap on the back door sent me gasping to my feet. The pulses pounded in my temples. I was too choked to say anything as Carter called:

"Can I come in? I'd like to phone."

When I did not reply he came in anyway. He called a number and said in a low, rapid tone:

"Not to-night. . . . No, I'm not backin' out. . . . Yeah, snoopy. . . . To-morrow—sure—sure."

A pause, then he said in sudden venomous warning:

"Don't you try it, you rat! I said I'd go through with it, an' I will. To-morrow night."

He rang off. He slipped out, closing the screen door softly. His footsteps were lost in the loose sand of the yard. Silence settled.

"WHAT is it," I thought, "that will cause me trouble if I snoop around? And what would have been pulled to-night if I hadn't been 'snoopy'? Do they expect me to be frightened away to-night?"

Carter's visit brought one consolation. The telephone was close. I had but to lift the receiver and some one would hear whatever went on. My worst danger, I decided, was from my own overwrought nerves. Just the same, I whispered to keep myself company as I brushed my hair in front of the cracked mirror.

I hooked the screens, closed the doors, and went to bed.

Some time during the silent night I dreamed. I thought I wakened suddenly. I seemed to be looking into a long, low room. At the end of the room a dim light showed through a half-opened door. A face appeared for a moment in the door. It was a long, white face, with ruffled hair and burning eyes. It was like a queer old picture, even to a crack across the canvas.

The light disappeared. I slept again. Later I heard the same scratching, creeping sound I had heard earlier in the evening. It was outside, then in the attic above. Drugged by fatigue, I was aware of the sound without fully waking. If I had investigated then, what wouldn't it have saved! But I dropped again into a heavy stupor.

In the morning I opened the doors wide to let in the early sunlight and fragrant breeze. I lingered in each door to catch the warmth, and the smell of clean sand. In the morning light the silence seemed restful instead of ominous and brooding.

BUT when I got to the back screen door I forgot sunlight, forgot everything but the nameless dread. The screen I had fastened so carefully was unhooked. Close to the hook was a long slash in the screen. Then I remembered the dream.

"Maybe I didn't dream it," I thought. "Maybe, too, I'd better go back to the Springs and see the doctor."

"Good morning." Carter's words brought me back.

Dully I answered his salutation. The wind ruffled his hair. I noticed how long and sallow his face was. In lamplight it would look white. In a flash I understood the dream. I had been staring into the dresser mirror, which gave unnatural perspective to the room. Carter had been standing in the closet door. The crack in the canvas really was the crack in the mirror. It was Carter who had cut the screen and crept up to the attic.

"I'm through being frightened," I determined. "Whatever Carter's doing, he's using a house he doesn't own, a house that's been temporarily loaned to me. He must stop. Snoopy, am I? I'll show him what snoopy means!"

Foolishly, I believed the thing was that simple. Like so many amateur detectives, I noted the obvious and entirely ignored what really counted. I did not once think of the creeping, scratching sound like vines against a window.

MY FIRST move was to get a pistol-shaped cigaret-holder from my car. Thereafter I carried it constantly. Then I found keys for the doors, though they were the flat sort that can be turned from the outside by pliers. My next move was to climb into the attic, after seeing Carter at work in the corral.

Light filtered into the attic through a cobwebby window. A hasty glance showed a dusty floor, heavy joists on the ceiling, an empty room. In the thick dust close to the window I saw marks of square boxes. Row on row they had stood there. Marks showed also of some one walking. The marks had been made recently, for a fine sifting of sand was already covering them. The window was nailed shut. I got down on my knees for a closer look at the marks and made out, inside one square, an X.

As I pondered over the mark, I heard a sound—a sound that set my pulses to beating loudly in my throat. A wild desire to run swept over me. Some one was coming up the stair, coming up slowly, stealthily. Another step and he would put his head through the open trap-door. I felt like a youngster caught with her hand in the jam pot. Then——

"Why should you be ashamed?" I asked myself. "It is this other who's intruding."

Boldly I gripped the pistol-shaped holder. Boldly I crossed the floor, and looked down into the widely startled eyes of Carter.

"BACK down the stairs and up against the wall," I ordered. "This sneaking has got to stop, Carter."

"I wasn't sneaking," he protested. "I was goin' up after my slicker. I left it on a nail by the window a couple months ago. It ain't rained since."

"It doesn't look like rain now," I retorted.

I backed him out with his hands high. Backed him through the kitchen to the screened porch, and out into the arms of Barry Keith. As we stood there, I heard the soft clump of horses' hoofs. Danton and Gary rode into the yard.

"As long as I'm here," I said firmly, loud enough for all to hear, "I want you to keep out of the house, Carter."

Carter glowered. The others were open-mouthed in amazement. Turning into the house, I said: "Come in, Mr. Keith."

Leaving Keith at the bottom of the stair to watch, I climbed into the attic again. I knew Carter was lying, but I wanted to prove it. One look left me utterly amazed. On a nail by the window hung the dust-covered slicker.

I went down the stair a bewildered and chastened young woman.

Keith looked at me with a question in his eyes. I did then what no amateur sleuth should ever do. I talked. I was sorry later, but could not recall the words.

"In the first place," I said, sitting on the steps, "I remarked to Carter yesterday that I could take care of myself. He retorted he hoped I could. Later Gary remarked I'd need to. Last night Carter put through a mysterious phone call. In the night some one slashed the screen, got into the house and up into the attic. It was Carter. There's nothing in the attic I can see."

As I said that, Keith started in surprise, but he recovered quickly, and I was too intent on my story at the time to notice it.

"To-day I caught Carter trying to get up there. He said he was after an old slicker. And the slicker is there!"

KEITH mused for a moment. Though I laughed when I told of the slicker, he did not smile. While I talked he had drawn a knife with a peculiar curve in one blade. He tapped the blade gently on the back of his left hand, at intervals striking a ring with a faint clinking sound.

"Miss Jessup, you're a nervy little thing. I don't doubt you can take care of yourself," he said slowly. "But I know just enough about circumstances here to think you'd be better off if you left."

"Perhaps so," I snapped. "But I'm going to continue to be snoopy. If I go, I'll see that some one comes to investigate."

His eyes gleamed quickly with a look of relief.

"That would be better," he said, glancing at his watch. "I have to go to Denver. If I leave at once, I'll not get back till morning. I'd feel better if I knew you were out of here."

Instantly I regretted confiding in him. Something in the gleam in his eyes, his manner, filled me with quick suspicion. Even if I sent help from town, the house would be empty that night. It was that night they wanted me out. I could not telephone, for among those eight listening ears might be a party to the scheme.

"I'll pretend to give in," I thought, "and leave the window unlocked. Then I'll come back to-night, and if nothing happens, I'll send some one out to-morrow."

In a few minutes Keith was riding away, satisfied. When I told Carter I was going, I thought he smiled sarcastically. As I drove out of the gate, it seemed to me that something else showed in his face. Far down the road, it occurred to me that Carter had looked relieved—strangely relieved for me. I wondered whether I had misjudged him.

A few miles from the house I parked in a sandy draw. There I sat all the blazing hot day, thinking about the house and Carter and Keith. Most of all, I thought about the X in the attic dust. Slowly glimmerings of the truth began to come to me.

"SNOOPING in this is dangerous," I thought. "I wish I had a real gun. These men recognize force. Nothing else."

A panicky desire came to take the road and drop the matter. After all, it was none of my affair. But a certain stubbornness and, I must confess, curiosity drove me on.

As dusk fell, I drove to a draw closer to the house. I walked from there. It was quite dark when I slipped through the bedroom window. The house was silent with the ominous, expectant silence that had crept in again, wreathing about me like a fog. But I held down the panic. Resolutely I climbed to the attic.

It too was black. Black and hot and close, smelling of dust and a closed room. I shut the trap, pressing it down tightly. The slight noise was echoed by a scurry in the far part of the attic. Nothing that night frightened me as that slight rustle did.

"There are greater things at stake than the scurry of a mouse," I told myself sternly.

Nevertheless, nervous, sickening chills froze me. Not once did I give way to the desire to sit down. Hour after hour passed in the black, tomb-like silence.

Then the sound came. It was faint but close at hand. Just the barest scrape. Searching fingers fumbled at the trap. It was wedged tight. I heard a muttered curse. Something—a knife perhaps — was inserted in the slit. Slowly a ray of light appeared as the trap began to open.

I held the pistol-shaped case tightly. Scarcely daring to breathe, I crouched by the trap, ready to thrust the pretended weapon into the man's face. If I could just keep them out of the attic that night, it would be enough. Judging by its unflickering beam, the man carried a flashlight. There was no danger of fire from a dropped lamp.

INCH by inch the trap came cautiously up. My heart pounded so loudly I marveled that he did not hear it. Perhaps his own was pounding, for his extraordinary caution showed his uncertainty. I saw his hand, his arm, his forehead. I thrust the pistol into his face. At that moment my plans were torn apart like a blown-out tube.

A voice so changed by excitement and clenched-teeth rage that I could not recognize it snarled from below:

"You rat! You would double-cross me!"

The man in the trap whirled. I heard a crashing roar and something whined between us. Another crashing roar, a spat of flame from close by, and the trap-door slammed shut. A body crashed. I heard running feet. Then silence fell.

When my mind ceased to race round like a whirlpool, I realized that the thing whining past had been a bullet. So close to death had my meddling brought me.

"Don't crouch here moralizing," I told myself. "A man's lying down there, probably dying. And his murderer is getting away."

It took more than physical strength to lift the trap.

The room below was utter blackness. The acrid smell of powder smoke still lingered, mixed with the stench of newly spilled blood. I trembled until I could not walk, but had to crawl down the stairs. Halfway down a new sound set my nerves to jangling. It was the clear, insistent ringing of a bell.

"The telephone, you fool," I said, recovering.

ABRUPTLY the ringing ceased. My foot, searching for the floor, touched a man's body. I fumbled my way into the bed-room and found a lamp. A moment later the yellow rays showed red stains on a gray shirt. The crumpled body was Carter, dead.

Close by him lay the knife which had opened the trap. I needed no second look to recognize the peculiar curve in the blade. It was Barry Keith's knife.

"Small wonder he wanted me away," I thought as I folded the knife and slipped it into my pocket.

The next instant I grasped the

door jamb for support, listening in breathless horror. From one of the other rooms came a low moaning, a moaning that rose to a long, eerie howl. It was not a loud howl, just a continual sound out of the blackness, rasping, whining. Suddenly I realized what it was. I relaxed against the door in limp relief.

"Nothing but the signal that the receiver is down," I said aloud.

Still weak from fright, I picked up the lamp and went out to the dining-room. Carefully I set it down and reached for the telephone. Then it occurred to me that the phone had been ringing as I opened the trap. The murderer had lifted the receiver, had probably stood there and listened to me come down. Even now he might be just outside the door or somewhere in the clinging shadows.

"Please hang up the receiver." The telephone girl's matter-of-fact voice cut through my choking terror.

"Murder!" I gasped. "Help! Murder!"

I heard her startled exclamation. And no more after that.

I WAKENED to tramping feet and many voices. The sheriff, a grizzled rancher, bent over me. In the confusion of voices I heard the cold drawl of Gary and the crackling laugh of Tad Danton. In amazement I saw the face of Barry Keith. Two more faces stood out from the crowd. One was fat, red Lynn, his eyes bulging as badly as his tobacco-lined cheek. The other was Jones, who leaned against the table, staring at the floor. Jones usually was worried, but now he was abject as a captive stepping blindfolded on a plank.

"D'you know who done this?" The sheriff shot the question at me before the haze left my eyes.

"No. I heard a shot. I ran in. He was dead." Somehow, I was ashamed of having been in the attic. With all these men around, my reason seemed flimsy, melodramatic.

"Got any idea who mighta done it?"

"No. I came here only yesterday. I don't know who might have killed him."

"I know." It was Gary's cold drawl. Every one turned to stare. Conscious of the attention, he said accusingly: "She ordered Carter out this mornin'. Told him if he come back she'd kill him." Pausing for effect, he added: "She had a gun."

"Uh, huh," grunted the sheriff, emphasizing the "huh." "Self-defense?"

"No," I snapped; "I didn't do it. Would I have phoned and brought you down on my neck if I did it?"

"You might," he affirmed, with the calmness of deep wisdom. "A nervous woman'll do lots of nutty things."

Another rancher stepped forward. He was a thin, dried-up wisp of a man, twisting an old brown stetson.

"Carter quarreled with somebody over the phone last night, or—er—well, early t'-night, I guess 'twas. I—uh——" He hesitated, then stammered: "I was goin' to phone an' jus' happened to hear part of it. Dunno who 'twas."

"'TWERE Keith," said Lynn, not afraid to say he'd listened.

"It mighta been," agreed the little man. "Keith ain't the on'y one Carter's ever quarreled with. A odd bird, Carter. I allus had a idea ranchin' wasn't his only occupation."

"Keep yer ideas to yerself," growled Danton.

"I can prove every step I've taken for forty-eight hours," said Keith suddenly. "Can the rest of you do it?"

The startled, shifting glances told how they were wondering and doubting whether they could. Yet that very inability, I thought, helped to prove innocence. Keith might have a good alibi, but there was the knife. I was going to pull it out, when my own predicament sprang up.

"Where's the gun he was shot with?" some one asked.

"The gun I threatened him with to-day," I said, seeing a path open, "is here."

I HANDED it to the sheriff. He examined it, looked at me, grinned. Turning suddenly, he aimed it at Gary and pulled the trigger. Gary shouted, dodged. A roar of laughter went up as they saw him unharmed and a white cigaret gleaming in the black mouth of the pistol.

"Have to take you, Keith," said the sheriff. "Couple of you get Carter's body. Jones, Danton, Lynn, is deputized. Stay here. Don't wanta leave this girl alone."

Jones started. His knuckles showed white through the tan as he gripped the table edge. Lynn went to the door and spat, then drew up a chair and sat down. Danton frowned.

"Got a sick horse over there," he said. "Oughta go back."

"You, then, Gary," said the sheriff.

Gary nodded, but he gnawed his lip and glowered. He seemed annoyed, probably because his accusation had failed.

Long after the crowd had gone I thrust my hand into my pocket. It twitched back from something cold and hard. Then I remembered.

"I didn't turn over the knife that would convict Keith."

After all, I consoled myself, the murder was part of something else. Some one connected with the affair was certain to come back. The entire solution would come at once. By now I was sure Carter had removed what was in the attic. How he got it out or where he put it, I could not say. But the others concerned did not know that the attic was empty.

The next day I bade good-by to the ranch again and went to the Springs, but not to ask for help. I was too far into the affair to back out. Late at night I returned with a thirty-eight and some poison. The poison took the scurrying out of the attic. The thirty-eight gave me confidence.

"I'll be here to greet," I vowed, "whoever comes."

All the hottest week in June I waited. During the day I stayed close indoors; at night I sat in the attic. Twice cowboys came in, fixed meals, washed the dishes, and went out again. And in spite of all my precautions, when the visitors came I was not in the attic.

All week I had feared to sleep. I took little cat-naps when I became exhausted, but I was too much on the alert to sleep soundly. One evening I lay down on the dining-room couch. I must have fallen into a deep sleep, for, although they drove a car, I did not hear them coming.

THE bang of the screen wakened me. I heard voices, footsteps. They were not careful or quiet. Instantly I was wide awake. I saw one of them in the kitchen. He could not see me in the darkened room. The bay of the window left a small space beside the couch. I swiftly slipped down and lay concealed. A match scratched and the light of the lamp shone out.

The two men stamped through. They climbed the attic stair. A moment's silence followed. Then there were loud curses and heavy, searching steps. I climbed over the couch and caught up the telephone.

"Call the sheriff," I said in hushed tones. "Hurry."

Then I went to the bottom of the attic stair to wait. A quarrel was raging fiercely above-stairs.

"Did you sell out to the water company? Did you?"

"No, I never"—in a voice trembling with fright. "Las' time I came to this house Carter had ten boxes of dynamite up here. 'We'll blow up th' dam t'-night an' show 'em who owns the water,' he says. Then that city girl come an' he put it off. Then he died."

"Is that true?" The man's voice was like a knife.

"Yes, that's true."

"Or is it true that you sold out an' was comin' up here to set fire to them boxes, an' Carter caught you on the stair an' you killed him? Ain't that it? Else why you been to town so much, an' where'd you git the extra money, an' why'd you look so queer when they mentioned Carter, huh?"

"I never killed him!" screamed the other. "Don't you come near me with that rope. He oughta died. He sold out to the water company. That's what he quarreled with Keith about."

"You're a liar!" came the snarl. "He quarreled with Keith over a broken fence. I listened to 'em. You sold out, an' *you* killed Carter!"

I HEARD the horrible shuffling of dodging and pursuing feet, followed by a scuffling; then cries and pleas.

"I ain't a-hangin' yuh by th' neck. I'm tyin' yuh to die by inches," said an excited voice. "Mebbe when the sun's beatin' down an' the moisture's gone from yer body, yuh'll want water. Mebbe then yuh'll know how the cattle feels when they ain't got nothin' to drink an' I got no money to buy 'em water. Mebbe yuh'll learn what sellin' out means."

I had started up the stairs, but now I waited. As long as the man was not dying, I thought he might as well stay trussed. A babble of frantic begging was shut off as a man came through the trap and shut it. He came down the stair. It was Gary.

"Stop there," I said, trying to keep my voice and the gun steady. "You're under arrest for conspiring to blow up the dam."

HIS answer was to throw himself squarely at me from the stairs. I dodged his leap, but he caught my gun hand. Another second and I was struggling to keep my hold on the gun and to keep my feet against the terrible weight of him. He bent my arm around until I thought it would break. Hot waves of agony burned my mind. My fingers loosened. He laughed scornfully. Then I heard the purring beat of a motor not far off.

I threw myself into the struggle with all my energy. I tried now just to keep him there. At any cost, I wanted to keep him occupied until the sheriff could come. I bit him, I kicked, I jabbed weak but annoying blows at his face. He laughed again. Then I bit his finger. He snarled a curse. Cupping his rough palm under my chin, he bent me back, back——"

Footsteps sounded in the house. Gary stopped pushing back my head to listen. Gathering all my remaining strength, I screamed. Gary dropped me and ran—straight into the sheriff.

"A man!" I gasped, rubbing my throat. "Hanging in the attic! He's the one who killed Carter!"

Other men had followed the sheriff in. They smothered exclamations as they rushed up-stairs. The sheriff bound Gary's hands, trying to look up the stairs as he worked. At last his curiosity was beyond control.

"Who is it, boys?" he yelled.

Came the reply, surprised, almost unbelieving:

"Tad Danton!"

Some of these men were going to blow up the dam," I told him. "Carter lowered the dynamite from the attic window. It's in the barn now. He caught Tad Danton coming up here and got shot."

I could not hide my pleasure at having solved the mystery. The respect in the sheriff's eyes was intoxicating. But while my pleasure was great, it was short-lived. Barry Keith came down the stairs.

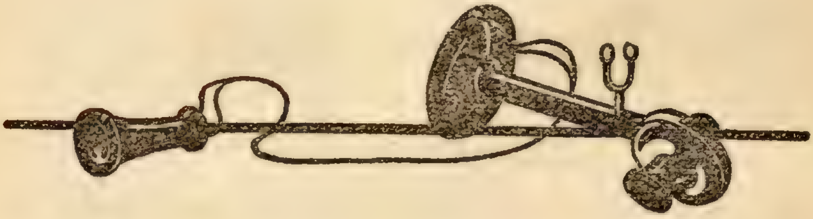
"Loan me your knife, Keith," requested the sheriff.

Keith put his hand into his pocket. My heart missed a beat as I waited for him to say that he did not have it. Then my mouth dropped open. I felt a sunken, beaten sensation as Keith pulled out his knife and handed it to the sheriff.

I could not wait until they left, but got out the knife I had found and looked at it closely. For the first time I saw that the curved blade bore the initials "T. D." In answer to my question, they told me it was a harness knife, quite common on ranches. I sank to the stair-step, feeling very humble.

"Why so solemn? Did he hurt you?" asked Keith.

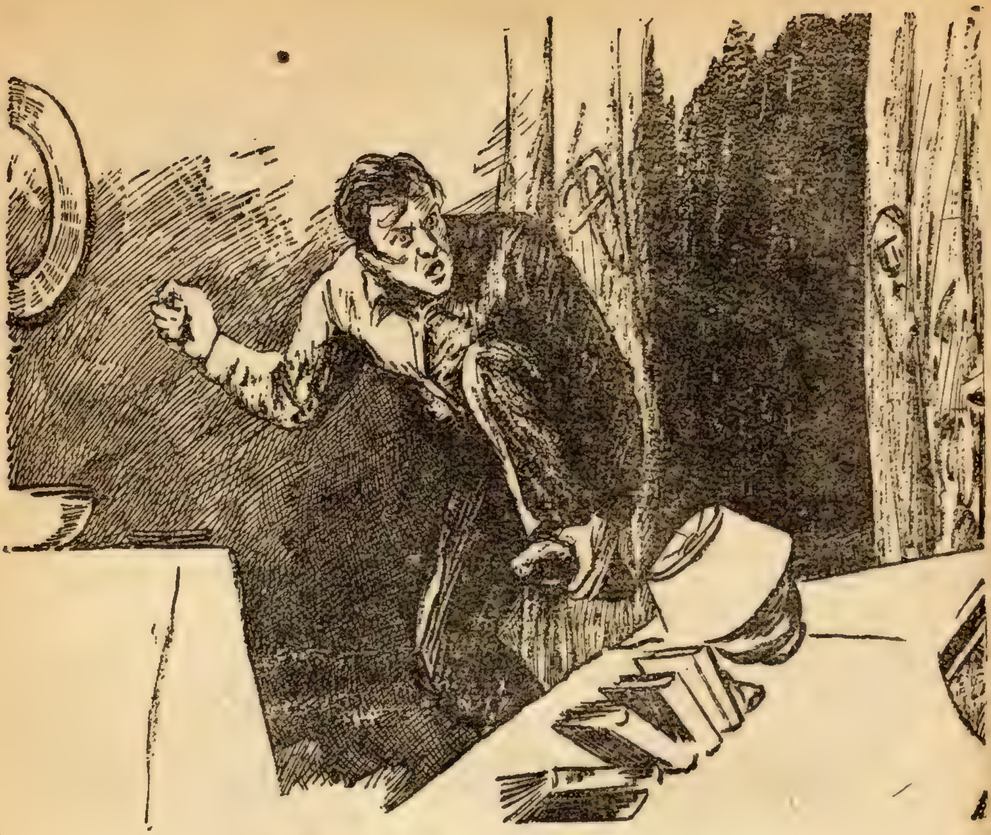
"No, just shook me up. But I've discovered something," I replied ruefully. "Just being snoopy doesn't make one a detective."



How Animals Use Their Ears

WHY do the ears of tigers, foxes, wolves, cats, and other beasts of prey bend forward instead of backward, as do the ears of animals of flight, such as hares, rabbits, deer?

Because the ears of beasts of prey are designed for the purpose of collecting sounds in the direction taken by the animals which they are pursuing. The ears of an animal of flight, by turning backward, enable it to hear the sound made by its pursuer.



Routine Stuff

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

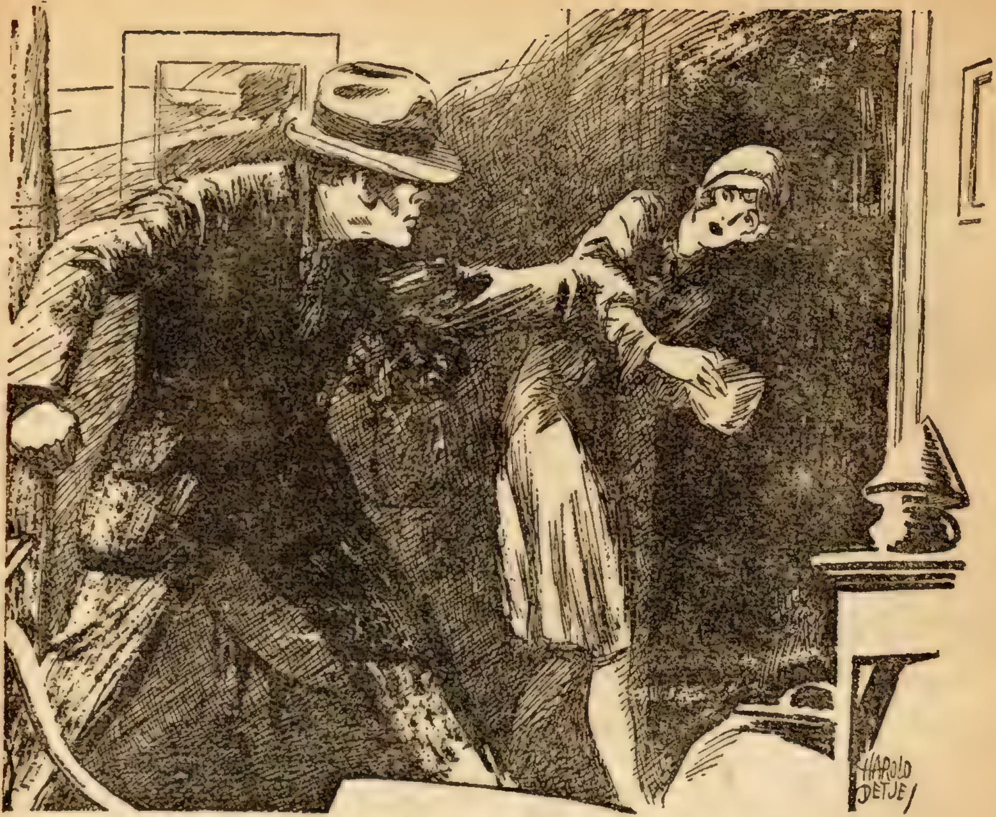
Disaster followed in the wake of a slim, alluring blonde whom no one could describe exactly. But Red Fleck knew her type, and that was enough for a man of action.

THE girl was less an individual than a type, but she was a type that attracts attention. Her hair was bobbed, blonde, and fluffy. The youthful character had not as yet given any stamp of individuality to her features. She was fashionably slender and the wisp of her fluttering skirt revealed the lines of her figure.

The young man who was on the point of entering the drug store on Bush Street paused to flash an appraising glance at her.

The girl stooped suddenly.

A gentleman's purse lay on the



He caught the girl as she was darting through the doorway.

sidewalk, directly beneath her tapering fingers. It was a fat purse, apparently well filled.

The combination of pretty girl, daring gown, and well-filled wallet apparently lost on the sidewalk, proved too much for the young man's curiosity. His errand in the drug store was postponed for the moment.

The girl's fingers opened the wallet. Her face was flushed with interest, her crimson lips parted with excitement. She drew out several yellow-backed treasury certificates and a green bank note or two.

Out of the drug store walked a man, rapidly, purposefully. He thrust his hand beneath the arm of the woman. No word was exchanged between the two as they stepped into a light roadster parked at the curb, while the girl, still holding the wallet, counted the money.

The car slipped out into the traffic and rattled swiftly away. The time was exactly five forty-six p. m.

THE young man entered the drug store. His thoughts were occupied by the vision of a pretty girl finding a wallet containing a large sum of money. Pretty girls and the finding of large sums of money are two ideas which have a large common denominator of human interest.

So engrossed was the young man in his thoughts that it was several minutes before he became irritated at the failure of the drug clerk to wait on him. He walked about impatiently, tapped on the glass showcase with the edge of a coin, received no answer, and finally peered over the counter.

His eyes encountered the toe of a human foot pointed toward the ceiling. Then he noticed for the first time the open drawer of the cash-register.

He rushed to the street, calling for the police.

The traffic officer at the corner came on the run, and a throng of curious people collected. The young man blurted out his story. An investigation showed that the drug clerk was seriously injured. A blackjack had almost crushed his skull.

It was not until later that the young man remembered the blonde girl, the finding of the wallet, and the man who had hurried from the drug store. He reported these facts in detail to the police. He could describe the physical charms of the blonde girl as a type, but not as an individual. The man who had hurried from the drug store, however, was merely a blur in his memory.

The police made a fruitless search for finger-prints, made a file of the case, and assigned two detectives to work on it. The newspapers carried a few short paragraphs.

THE next afternoon two young men who were sauntering into a cigar store paused to contemplate a remarkably attractive blonde picking up a wallet from the sidewalk.

The girl was slim and attractive. She stooped without bending her knees. Her skirt was short. There was a breeze. The wallet was well filled. The time was exactly five thirty-seven p. m.

A man hurriedly emerged from the cigar store and jumped into a touring car. The girl followed. The doors slammed and the car whirred out into the stream of traffic that was sweeping along Polk Street. The two young men sighed, muttered some comment, and entered the cigar store.

The cash drawer was open. The clerk was sprawled in a grotesque attitude upon the floor. A trickle of blood came from a nasty scalp wound.

The case was duly reported to the police.

Slim Oglivy, assigned to headquarters as police reporter from one of the morning papers, caught the tardy report of the girl in the drug store robbery, took the statement of the two men who had discovered the cigar store robbery, and came out with a story whose headlines dominated the front page:

BLONDE LURE GUARDS THUG

IT WAS five forty-five p. m. The rather stout woman who was entering the stationery store swept with a glassy-eyed stare the slender blonde who waited without. The glance was such as only a portly woman in the early forties can give to a slender blonde in the early twenties whose skirts are too short, who suggests a type rather than an individual, and whose features have acquired no distinguishing marks of character.

The blonde stooped to the sidewalk, and the portly woman saw, for the first time, the lady's pocketbook which lay on the edge of the gutter.

The portly woman paused.

The blonde hesitated with fingers that hovered over the snap to the pocketbook. Apparently she doubted whether she should open it or not.

The glassy-eyed woman waddled closer, mouth open. Her curiosity held her more firmly enthralled than would have been the case had the pocketbook disclosed any possible combination of articles.

Would the hussy never open it? She seemed on the point of doing so, then stopped. Once she made as though to drop the pocketbook back into the gutter.

The portly woman extended a pudgy forefinger.

"What's in it?" she asked.

But at that moment a masculine figure hurried from the stationery store. He grasped the girl by the arm, propelled her toward a sedan that was parked at the curb, and almost pushed her inside. In the hurry and bustle the blonde dropped the leather purse.

The portly woman did not stoop to snatch it until the sedan was a block away. Then her eager fingers snapped the catch. The purse was filled with oblong sheets of plain paper.

Muttering an exclamation of disgust, the woman waddled into the stationery store. It was not until she had waited indignantly for three minutes that she heard a low moan from the rear of the store.

The girl on the floor was slowly recovering consciousness after having received a crushing blow upon the back of her head. She was lying close to the open safe.

The portly woman picked up the desk telephone, called police headquarters, and gave them "a piece of her mind."

The next morning every paper in the city carried scare heads.

THE time was exactly five fifty-six p. m.

The roadster that was drawn up before the filling-station contained a man and a woman. Another car was parked in front of the gasoline pump. It contained a fluffy-haired blonde. The white-uniformed attendant inside apparently was making change.

The man and the woman who were waiting showed signs of impatience. Either the bill which the attendant was changing was a very large one, or else the man was hopelessly slow in his mental arithmetic.

The man in the roadster pressed his hand upon the horn button. He was in a hurry. What exasperated him was not only the dawdling slowness of the attendant, whom he could see through the window, but also that he didn't even glance up from the cash register. Apparently he had no interest in any business he might lose.

The blonde stepped from the other car. As she opened the door, there was a flash of silk and a glimpse of perfectly fashioned legs. The man in the roadster abruptly ceased to press the button of his horn.

The girl called something to the man inside.

He nodded and came out, his hands full of paper money which he thrust into the purse of the waiting blonde. She made no effort to count the change, but pointed to the wind-shield on the car.

The attendant nodded, stooped, picked up a sponge, and began to scrub the glass, standing with one foot on the running board and one hand clinging to the wind-shield post. During all this time his back was turned to the couple in the waiting roadster.

THE blonde stepped back into the car.

Then there sounded the throb of a motor, the grind of gears, and the car slipped smoothly out into the traffic of Van Ness Street, with the white-uniformed man upon the running board still sponging off the wind-shield.

It was not until the car had gone half a block that the wide eyes of the couple in the roadster saw him open the car door and slide into the front seat beside the blonde.

It was then that the two people in the roadster realized the reason for the vague feeling of incongruity which had gripped them when the attendant left the service station. His coat had been the familiar white coat of the attendant, but his trousers had been of blue serge.

The man jumped from the roadster, made a swift inspection of the interior of the service station, and dashed back to the wheel of his car. With his horn blaring the alarm, he raced into the traffic and tore after the other car.

He went through a closed traffic signal at Polk and Van Ness Streets and saw the irate officer on duty board another machine and start in pursuit. Then he encountered a traffic officer at Pine, and was stopped three blocks beyond.

In excited tones he tried to explain what had happened. But it took the officers several seconds to comprehend the situation and several more to organize a pursuit. The sole effect of that pursuit was to disorganize the traffic of the wide boulevard. The bandit car had slipped into sanctuary. Fifty motorists were stopped on suspicion, and the police made exactly fifty wrong guesses.

The skull of the attendant had been fractured, and he died without regaining consciousness.

JIM CAREY, captain of police, ripped the end from a cigar, stuffed it into his mouth, and applied a match with a hand that trembled slightly. His eyes were red-rimmed and the baggy pouches beneath them spoke of worry and sleeplessness.

The slight man across the desk blinked at him through thick spectacles.

"We are dealing with a master mind of crookdom," he said.

Captain Carey removed the cigar from his lips long enough to spit explosively into the brass cuspidor.

"Yeah," he remarked, and the word might have been either a question or an exclamation of disgust.

The slight man blinked again, hitched forward to the extreme edge of his chair, and tapped impressively with a bony forefinger.

"The crimes are virtually clueless," he said.

CAPTAIN CAREY puffed smoke violently, but made no comment. He was of the direct, two-fisted school which believes in action. Detective Mansfield was inclined to theorize. The two men were friends because of long association, but Carey had never subscribed to the methods of the detective.

"Yes," went on Mansfield, "we see at first glance that the man back of this series of crimes has a very fine knowledge of psychology. Take the methods he employed to keep the criminal from being interrupted at his work, for instance. A beautiful pair of limbs, the finding of money—two thought-complexes which have a universal appeal. Nine men out of ten would stop to gaze upon a beautiful figure. Almost ten people out of ten will stop to watch some person finding money. Then there was the play upon curiosity. Notice that in one instance, when dealing with a mature woman, the blonde did not open the purse. She merely let her fingers flutter about the catch."

Captain Carey jerked the cigar from his twitching lips and banged his fist down upon the desk.

"Say," he exploded, "I don't give

a damn about all that theory stuff. What I want to know is, how can we catch the crooks?"

Detective Mansfield blinked and smiled. The smile was patient—almost patronizing.

"You'll have to listen to my premises in order to understand my theory," he said soothingly, as one would talk to an angry child.

"Now, let's start with the idea that our man is educated. The methods he used to attract attention prove that. In every instance, possible customers who might have interrupted the crook at work were prevented from entering the stores. The methods that commanded their interest were simple but effective.

"Therefore, we have a so-called master mind to deal with. In other words, an educated criminal. Now, was that master mind the man who held up the stores or some person who directed the crime? I am inclined to the former theory, because only one couple was at work. An executive would have had several teams using the same methods.

"But two things are very striking. One is that all of the hold-ups occurred virtually in one district. The other is that all of them happened at almost the same hour.

"As far as the time is concerned, it again shows masterly reasoning. Between five-thirty and six there is always a slack in trade. Yet the cash registers are well filled, for the afternoon trade has left its money. The stores are usually short-handed at that time. Those that remain open in the evening have one employee at dinner at that time."

CAREY again interrupted.

"Cut it short, Mansfield. What I want to know is have you got anything definite? You said all them crimes took place in a certain district. You're damn' right they did. All of 'em were in *my* district. And the Chief wants action. The papers are panning the force. The Chief's lookin' to me to get some results."

Mansfield nodded gravely, blinked owlishly.

"Ah, yes, I am coming to it. Remember that all the crimes took place between five-thirty and six. A very good time. But there are other good times. Just before lunch, for one. Yet no crimes took place then. Why?

"Because I believe that the woman can get away only between five and six. This would mean that she is a working girl, holding a position somewhere that lets her out at five. She meets her companion, and they pull one hold-up—only one, mind you. Then she hurries home.

"What we have to look for is a blonde who works, who leaves work at five o'clock, and who lives with her parents or with a husband who gets home shortly after six. That much we have to go on as a working hypothesis."

CAPTAIN CAREY chewed viciously on the frayed end of his cigar.

"That's fine. Send in Red Flick as you go out, will you, Mansfield?"

Mansfield took the hint, nodded, blinked, and left the room.

Red Flick thrust his broad shoulders through the door, grunted, and eased his great bulk into the chair just vacated by the owlish detective.

Flick was a "special duty" man. There were two in Carey's district. Red Flick was the best. Carey had personally groomed him for the job.

A special duty man has no particular hours, reports directly to the Captain, and is chosen because he is a fast worker, a quick thinker, and unswervingly loyal.

With Flick, Captain Carey was at ease.

He tilted back his chair, elevated his broad soles to the desk, inhaled the cigar smoke deeply, and managed a grin.

"Red, I want you to take a whirl at this hold-up team. Got any theories?"

Flick shook his head.

"That's good," mumbled the Captain. "Mansfield's full of 'em. He's got it narrowed down to a blonde girl who works until five and is due home at six. Guess that leaves only about nine million suspects."

Flick grinned. Young, upstanding, two-fisted, there was a light of carefree deviltry in his dancing blue eyes. His nose, upturned at the end, emphasized the length of his upper lip. His red hair had been combed, but didn't show it. His face was shot with freckles and tanned with wind and sun.

Captain Carey gazed at him approvingly.

"The Chief's ridin' me because it's all happenin' in my district. Get busy an' see what you can find out."

Flick nodded, scraped back his chair, and got to his feet. Half way to the door he paused, six feet two of poised energy.

"You want reports?" he asked.

"Reports, hell! I want action!"

Flick nodded, jerked the door open, and went out.

Captain Carey sighed, removed his cigar, and spat again.

AN HOUR later Flick had gone over the report of each of the hold-up crimes. One outstanding feature impressed him. In every case the criminals had used a different car. To Flick that meant but one thing. The crooks must have stolen a car just before going on a job, used it to pull the hold-up, and then abandoned it.

Red went to the records of the stolen-car division, and looked up, not stolen cars, but cars which had been returned to their owners after being located by the police.

He made a list of these cars, looked up the districts from which they had been stolen, crossed out certain ones, and finished with a list of several dozen car-owners.

He climbed into his light roadster and started out to call upon each owner in the list. It was routine work, slow and tedious; but he had learned that all work in the pursuit of crooks is founded upon a grind of routine. The crook strikes and vanishes. The police must trail him along a cold scent. In order to pick up information, hundreds of blind leads must be followed. As a special duty man, Red Flick had great liberty of operation, but he had to do most of the routine work himself.

It was after lunch when he got his first reward. A flashy, eight-cylinder touring car had been stolen at five-fifteen the afternoon before from a residence in Geary and Leavenworth. It had been restored to its owner that very morning. An officer had noticed it parked all night near the corner of Bush and Polk. He had taken the number of the license, found that it tallied with that of a car reported stolen, and notified headquarters.

THE owner of the car was one of those men who are inclined to think that the police force should accomplish miracles as a matter of routine. When Red Flick found him, he at once launched into a complaining tirade.

"The speedometer shows it wasn't driven but three miles. I reported the loss before five-thirty. What happens? The car stands out all night, with cops walking by it an' rubberin' at it. The car must have been parked there inside of half an hour. But I don't get called until next morning. What sort of service is that?"

"Yeah," muttered Red. "Lemme take a look through it. Maybe I can catch the guy that took it."

The owner sneered.

"Yes, yes, by all means. The police held it half the morning after I'd identified it, going through the same rigmarole. Now you're here to do it over again."

Red cast a shrewd eye over the car, then over the owner.

"What'd you say your business was?"

"Broker."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Use the car much?"

"Quite a bit."

"Little straw in the back end. S'pose the crooks left it there?"

The owner lowered his eyes.

"How should I know?"

Red shrugged his shoulders.

"Looks like straw from the cases they put over whisky bottles sometimes. S'pose the crooks that took it used the bus for bootleggin'?"

The owner became suddenly reticent.

"I don't know nothin' about that straw."

"Yeah," remarked Red. "You wouldn't."

Then he entered the car, removed the cushions, and began a minute examination of the floor, the seats, the windows, and the steering wheel.

IT WAS a torn piece of cardboard, standing on end where it had slipped down behind the front cushion, which arrested his attention. It was perhaps two inches wide, by an inch and a half long. The lower edge was straight, the other sides torn and irregular.

Upon the bit of cardboard appeared several penciled figures. First 164.38, a line, and then 82.19. The pencil lines were faint, and the cardboard about them was somewhat depressed.

"Know anything about this?" he asked the owner.

The man shook his head. This time his denial was obviously genuine.

"It's a new one on me."

Red nodded.

"That's all," he said.

He got into his roadster, drove around the block, parked before a cigar store, and went to the telephone.

"Say," he asked Detective Mansfield, when he had received his connection, "gimme the exact amounts that were taken from the tills in them blonde hold-ups."

A moment later Mansfield rattled off a string of figures. The figure showing the loss from the service station hold-up was one hundred and sixty-four dollars and thirty-eight cents.

"That's all, thanks," said Red, and hung up.

"Fifty-fifty," he muttered. "The stick-up and the broad split fifty-fifty: eighty-two nineteen to each."

The bit of cardboard in his pocket had assumed new value.

Back in his roadster, Red examined every inch of the surface of that card. The nature of those pencil marks puzzled him. They were faint, very fine, and the paper was deeply depressed where the pencil had left its marks.

"Hard lead, sharpened to a fine point," muttered Red.

Draftsmen, he knew, frequently carried pencils with hard lead. These were used to give faint outlines to sketches that were to be inked in afterwards. Architects also carried hard lead pencils; but neither architects nor draftsmen ordinarily murdered service-station employees for one hundred and sixty-four dollars and thirty-six cents, and split the amount with blonde accomplices.

THEN another thought flashed through Red's mind.

Certain cabarets sometimes give favors consisting of cards to which are attached small pencils on a string. Dance programs also have these pencils dangling from red, silken cords. The pencils are not more than two inches long. They are very thin and must necessarily have hard leads to keep the points from breaking, because the pencils are so slender.

Red checked over the entire district in his mind. Because he patrolled it every day from one end to another, he knew pretty much what was in it. The cardboard looked very much as though it had been part of a folded dance program.

Red started to canvass the dancing schools.

One didn't have programs. One had little slips of colored pasteboard that slipped into the pocket. Two were catch-as-catch-can affairs where one hardly knew the names of one's partners, let alone programing them in advance.

It was the fourth that yielded results.

Here an afternoon dance was a feature, and gratuitous programs were distributed to persons who purchased tickets good for the entire afternoon. These programs had slender pencils dangling from them, and were of a weight and thickness that about matched the bit of paper in Red's pocket.

Red appraised the crowd with canny eyes.

For the most part they were married women who had sneaked away for an afternoon. They were supposedly shopping, at a theater, or visiting girl friends. They met partners, gave assumed names, enjoyed themselves until about five o'clock, and then mysteriously vanished to take up the humdrum duties of household drudgery. There were, besides these, one or two regular "entertainers," a gold digger or two, and a few love-lorn couples.

THE men were of varying types. There were traveling salesmen looking for a chance to get acquainted, "tired business men," lounge lizards, and adventurers. Doubtless some of them were slick crooks, looking for opportunities for blackmail in one form or another.

A large percentage of the women were blondes, and at least fifteen would have fitted the meager descriptions of the woman whom the papers were pleased to describe as "The Blonde Bandit."

Red sighed. In some manner he must pass this milling throng through a strainer, allowing the innocent to slip through, but holding back the guilty. Perhaps the couple he sought were here. Perhaps they had only been there on the afternoon of the service-station hold-up. Perhaps he was on a wrong clue altogether.

He made his way to one of the chairs reserved for spectators, and began to classify every one in the crowd. He was looking for a slim, young blonde, more a type than an individual, who danced with a certain man regularly. Red Flick hadn't just determined what sort of man he should be. He knew the man would be a good dancer, since he must frequent dance clubs. He would be athletic, and he would probably wear a blue serge suit. But, above all, there would be that indefinable something about him that marks the wolf. The man would have a firm mouth and a wavering eye. His general appearance might show character and decision, but there would be a weakness in him; something missing.

He found three blondes who might answer for the woman. These three danced every dance, mostly with the same partners. Number one had a partner whose face showed a vacuous delight as he held the blonde to him. Red dismissed this couple instantly. Number two might be the ones, but there was just a little too much conversation during the dances. The man Red Flick was after would not be a talker. He could talk with a glib enough tongue when occasion demanded, but he would be quiet otherwise.

COUPLE number three seemed to meet every requirement. The girl was graceful; a blonde, so typical that one thought of type rather than person. The man was about thirty, well set up, quick in his motions, and light on his feet.

Red Flick got up, left the hall, and took up a station across the street. His watch showed that it was four forty-five.

Ten minutes passed. Then the couple that had attracted his attention came out, paused for a swift word on the stairs, and separated. The man went west, the girl east.

Red followed the man.

After five blocks the man turned to the right. He walked more slowly now and seemed to be scanning the various machines that were parked at the curb. Red shortened the distance between them.

A snappy sport roadster was parked in the last parking-place in the block. The keys were visible dangling from the ignition lock. Because of its position, it was possible to shoot it out into the traffic without even pausing to back or turn.

The man whom Red was following moved closer to the curb, paused, looked swiftly about him, slid into the driver's seat, and pressed his foot upon the starter.

The motor of the powerful roadster purred into life. The wheels turned swiftly, bearing the car away from the curb and out into the traffic. The man manipulated the wheel with swift grace, sending the car through the gears and up past the legal limit of speed.

THEN Red tapped the man on the shoulder.

Only then did the driver become aware of the passenger who had climbed onto the running board. He looked back, his face white and drawn and filled with fear.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Pull over to the curb," said Red.

The man obeyed. His right hand fluttered from the wheel toward his hip, paused, then went back again to the wheel.

When the car had stopped at the curb the man looked up. His tongue darted out to moisten his pale lips.

"What is it?" he asked, poised, tense, his right hand hovering over the wheel.

"Sort of cut the corner there at the intersection, didn't you?" asked Red.

A look of relief flooded the man's face.

"Maybe I did," he admitted, suddenly jovial. "I was in a hurry. Suppose I hand you fifty dollars as bail? You see, I'm still in a hurry."

Red nodded.

"All right, I guess. Lemme see your drivin' license."

The man smiled.

"In my other clothes."

"What's your name?"

"Richard Langley."

"Your car?"

"Certainly."

"All right. Unfasten that registration certificate and pass it up."

Of a sudden Red's voice was as hard as his eyes, and those eyes were as hard as twin chunks of ice. He had moved to the door of the car, and his own right hand was at his hip, steady, waiting.

RELUCTANTLY the man unfastened the registration card from about the steering post and handed it to Red.

"Humph!" grunted Red, letting his eye sweep over it in a swift flicker of interest. "If this is your car, how comes it's registered in the name of Harold Offberg?"

The tongue again flicked at the pale lips.

"That's easily explained. Offberg is my wife's brother. I had had some trouble in my business, and I keep the car in Harold's name, so my creditors won't bother me."

"Yeah, I see," commented Red, as he walked around the machine, apparently satisfied. "Sorry to bother you, Mr. Langley."

Once around the car, he opened the other door and slid into the seat. The muzzle of a grim revolver was thrust against the driver's side.

"But the certificate ain't in Offberg's name at all. Offberg is a name I just made up. You don't even know the name that's on the certificate. Drive to headquarters, an' keep both hands on the wheel."

The man hesitated, gulped, flicked his tongue to his pale lips once more, then started the car from the curb.

"If there's any smash, you'll get a forty-four in your guts before I take a header through the windshield," remarked Red in a conversational tone of voice.

They drove five blocks in silence.

"Only got eighty-two dollars an' nineteen cents out of the last job, eh?" asked Red casually.

The skin over the man's knuckles became white where the hands gripped the steering wheel.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the man.

"And the fellow croaked. It'll mean the rope for both you and the girl," commented Red.

"Say," rasped the voice of the man who had given his name as Langley, "you've got me for stealin' a car, an' that's all. An' that's all you'll ever get me for, see?"

RED nodded, reached forward, and pulled one of the fingers back from the steering wheel. The afternoon light shone upon the skin with a peculiar, yellowish glitter. Red's hand explored the surface of the finger.

"Collodion, eh? No wonder you never left any finger-prints. Old-timer, eh?"

The driver said nothing.

They arrived at headquarters, and Red took his man in to the desk sergeant.

"Stealin' an automobile. Caught 'm in the act. Got the car outside. He's got collodion over his finger tips, so he won't leave prints. Slick dodge. He's probably an old-timer. See if you can find a record. Also, I want to see what he's got in his pockets."

There followed the routine of booking the man and searching his pockets. All of his belongings were placed in an envelope, and the envelope was filed in a huge safe.

The hip-pocket produced a small, deadly automatic and a blackjack. There was a ring containing a dozen different types of automobile switch-keys, a wallet with some hundred and fifty dollars, a fountain pen, a cigaret lighter, cigaret case, pocket-knife, and a crumpled receipt for taxi fare.

Red Flick went through the lot with an appraisal that seemed almost careless. Then he slipped out once more, and resumed the grind of routine. He found his car, drove to the head office of the taxi company, gave the number of the receipt taken from the pocket of the suspect, and received the address of a cab stand, with the name of a driver.

THE driver turned a surly eye upon Red Flick's countenance.

"You drove a couple somewhere a coupla nights ago. The guy was about thirty, dark blue serge suit, dark hair an' eyes. The woman was around twenty-one or -two, blonde."

The taxi driver removed the stub of a cigaret from his lower lip and spat into the gutter.

"Think so?" he asked.

Red flashed into action. His hand descended upon the cab driver's shoulder and gripped it until the man winced.

"I ain't thinkin' it, I'm knowin' it! I want to know where you took 'em, an' I'm wantin' to know quick. If you think the inside of a cell will help your thinkin' apparatus any, we'll try it—after I've jolted your head with a coupla short-arm jabs that'll probably help."

The driver squirmed, but finally came through with the information.

"It was out on Stanyan somewhere. I can't remember the number. It was a way's south of the park. There's an apartment house on the east side of the street, with a little garden effect in the entrance. I didn't pay much attention to it."

Red grunted and climbed back into his roadster.

On the second swing up and down the street he caught sight of the place. It was getting late. The lights were on, and passing automobiles were switching on headlights. The sun had set about fifteen minutes before, and a bank of gray fog was rolling in from the ocean.

RED thought of the sandwich he had gulped for lunch, of the dinner which he had missed altogether, sighed, curled up on the seat, draped his feet over the steering wheel, and lit a cigaret.

An hour passed. The fog had settled upon the wind-shield in little beads. The chill of evening penetrated his blood, yet Red waited patiently, smoking cigaret after cigaret.

Several people emerged from the apartment house. One or two went in. None of them were the people in whom Red was interested.

At length a woman came tripping down the stairs. A light handbag was in her hand. She glanced up and down the street after the manner of one who is waiting for a taxicab.

Red sighed, tossed the half-smoked cigaret away in a glittering arc, opened the door of his roadster, and eased his bulk out onto the sidewalk.

"Want a lift, sister?"

She raised scornful blue eyes, sniffed, turned one shoulder, and gazed stonily down the street.

"Yeah, yuh can either ride with me in the roadster or wait until I call the wagon."

She started, turned, gazed at him with wide blue eyes, and then broke into a run.

Red's long legs flashed into action. His hand reached out and caught the slender arm.

"Not so fast, sister, not so fast."

She flared at him with short spitting sentences.

"Brute! Leave me alone! I'll call the police. . . . Help! Masher!"

A passing motorist slammed on the brakes of his car, jumped to the sidewalk, and encountered the calm gaze of Red Flick.

"Lookin' for somethin', mister? I'm Red Flick of headquarters, special duty. Know the jane?"

The motorist muttered something and climbed back into his machine.

"Goin' bye-bye with me?" asked Red.

The girl's white teeth bit into her lip.

"You've nothing on me at all. This is an outrage! My husband will make you pay for this."

"Husband?"

"Certainly."

"Where is he?"

"Up-stairs in my apartment, of course."

"Well, ma'am, that's fine. Let's go see him."

Red led the way toward the apartment house. The girl hesitated for a moment, then ceased to pull back.

"Very well," she said coldly.

Arm in arm, they walked into the apartment house, went up the automatic elevator, and paused before a door at the end of the corridor.

"Oh, George!" called the girl.

The door was opened by a big, raw-boned man in shirt sleeves and stocking feet. He gazed from one to the other with a look of slow perplexity spreading over his features.

Red ushered the girl into the room, his great shoulders thrusting the door back; then he kicked the door shut behind him.

"SAY," grunted the raw-boned man, dropping the newspaper he had been holding in one hand, to the floor, "who th' hell are you, an' what're you doin' with my wife?"

The blonde rattled the answer which had been on the tip of her tongue.

"He's my real sweetheart, George, my true lover. I'm going away with him."

Her arms flashed out in a caressing gesture.

"Th' hell you are!" grunted George, and exploded into immediate action.

There was no time for explanations, no opportunity for Red Flick to reach for his gun or club. The big man was upon him like a whirlwind, his fists lashing out in vicious blows.

The girl managed to cling to Red's left arm.

From the very start Red appreciated the girl's strategy. The husband was brawny, heavily muscled, and he knew a great deal about fighting, particularly of the rough-and-tumble variety. The girl's remark had converted him into a raging demon. Red recognized the man as of the type which is insanely jealous. Rough as he was, he had acquired, in some manner, this delicate blonde, and his life was evidently spent in fear lest he should lose her. Jealousy was his obsession. And how he could fight!

There could be but one outcome to the struggle. The two men would thrash about, almost equally matched. The girl would slip out of the room during the turmoil and get away.

BUT Red Flick had been trained to cope with emergencies as part of his routine, and he had noted the other's stockinged feet as soon as he entered the room.

Now he wasted no time with his fists, nor did he try to counter the blows which chopped upon his face. He simply lowered his eyes, watched his chance, raised his heel, and stamped it down upon the other's instep.

Then he swung about, made a quick motion with one of his long arms, and caught the girl as she was darting through the doorway.

"She's lyin', George. I'm Flick from headquarters. I'm arrestin' her on a charge of murder an' robbery, accessory before the fact. What d'you know about it?"

But the raw-boned man was hopping about on one foot, holding his crushed instep in his hands. For the moment mere words had no effect upon his brain.

"You're a cute trick, sister," said Red, without emotion of any sort, and fastened steel handcuffs upon the girl's slender wrists.

The clicking of the steel bracelets sobered the man and diverted his attention from the pain of his instep.

"The twist's been goin' to a dance club in the afternoon an' holdin' up a joint on the way home at night. She's the one the papers are describin' as the Blonde Bandit. I'm takin' her to headquarters. I don't think you're mixed up in it, but you'd better come with us."

THE man sank into a chair and shook his head.

"You're goofy. She's been goin' to dances all right, but with her sister. An' she comes right home. Dinner's always on the table when I get here."

Red nodded.

"I figured there was some sort of an alibi like that mixed up in it. They had to work fast on them hold-ups. But I ain't got no time to organize a debatin' society here. I got a roadster out front. We can go in that."

"It's all a lie!" stormed the girl.

The man looked from the girl to Red, a flush of hostility mantling his forehead.

"That's my wife you're talkin' about," he said.

It was plain that the blonde could twist him about her finger, control him with a glance.

"Did you know she was leavin' you?" asked Red. "She got frightened to-night when her partner didn't meet her with the stolen car. She thought somethin' might be wrong."

"What a lie that is!" flared the girl. "I was going to the delicatessen for some stuff for breakfast."

"Yeah," sneered Red, and snapped the catch on the bag which the girl had been carrying.

It was neatly packed with dresses, underthings, and shoes, and a blued steel automatic showed on the top of the pile.

"We're leavin', George. Better get your shoes an' coat on an' come along."

DETECTIVE MANSFIELD sat on the other side of Captain Carey's desk, drumming on the polished wood with nervous fingers. The desk light cast shaded rays through an atmosphere that was thick with cigar smoke. The segment of light was like a milky cone.

"I platted the location of the robberies, then checked up on the places from which the cars had been stolen. The maps show a close connection," said Mansfield.

"Acting upon the assumption that the automobile thief was operating from a central point, I used the locations from which these machines had been stolen as the circumference of a circle. The circle centers within a space of three blocks.

"Now I propose to establish a guard——"

He broke off as the telephone rang.

Captain Carey pressed the receiver to his ear, listened intently for a moment while the telephone gave forth a series of metallic sounds, then grinned.

"Send 'im in," he said.

Detective Mansfield frowned.

He sensed the subtle antagonism of Captain Carey. He felt that if he were not related to the Chief, the Captain would show open hostility at times. The ways of Mansfield were the ways of deduction and reasoning. Captain Carey's school was that of two-fisted action. Between the two there could be no common ground. Association had made them personal friends but official enemies.

"Really, this is quite important," snapped Mansfield. "I believe that a faithful adherence to the methods I am outlining will result in the capture of the bandits."

Captain Carey grunted and ripped the end from a fresh cigar with his great, fang-like teeth.

"The bandits are caught," he said.

THE door opened, and Red Flick walked into the room, a huge figure of well-developed muscle, so perfectly proportioned that his great size was not at first apparent.

Captain Carey looked at his special duty man with anxious eyes.

"Ain't no doubt about it, Red?"

"Naw. I got 'em cinched without the identifications, but a couple of the guys that was slugged have kicked through on the man. The broad'll squeal before mornin'. We got 'em dead to rights."

"Tell us about it, Red."

Red shrugged his shoulders.

"Ain't much to tell. The guy was a two-time loser from the East. He'd drifted out here an' was playin' the dance hall racket. The broad was a twist that fell for him. They played it for an alibi. They'd leave the dance, grab a car, pull off a job, an' beat it for home in a cab. The broad has a man that was nuts about her. She'd always have supper on the table when he came in."

Captain Carey took a deep drag at the cigar.

"And they identify him?"

"Yeah. He's caught dead to rights, dead open an' shut case."

Mansfield sighed.

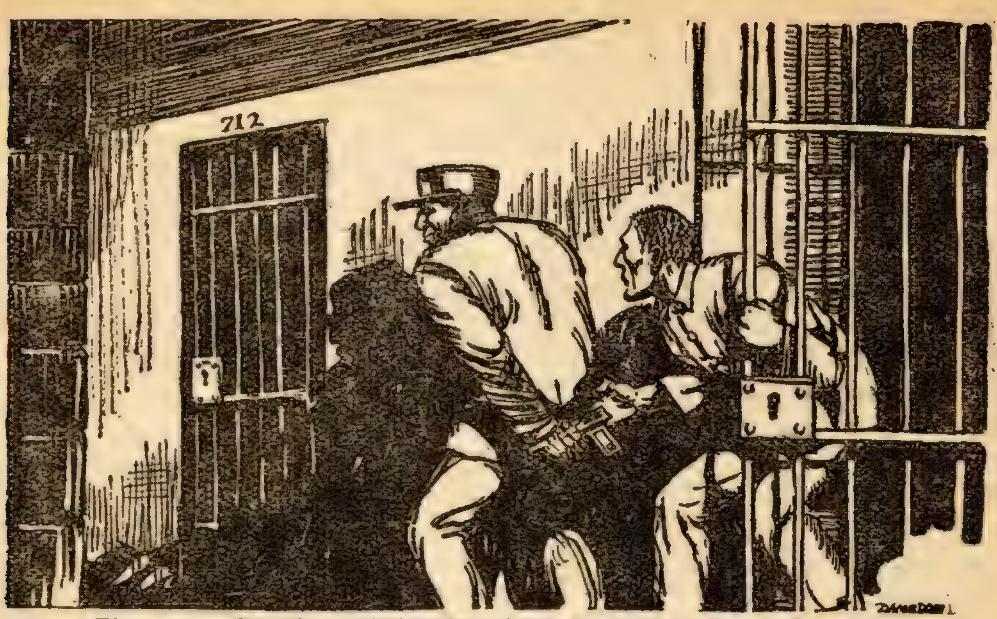
"I'm glad to note my deductions were correct in the main. Another twenty-four hours, and I'd have had a drag-net spread out that they'd have walked into."

Captain Carey flicked the ash from the end of his cigar and chuckled softly. There was that in the chuckle which caused Detective Mansfield to shift uneasily in his chair.

"How'd you catch 'em, Red?" asked the Captain.

Red shrugged his shoulders, suddenly inarticulate.

"Just routine methods," he said. "Plain routine stuff."



There was the glint of an automatic as it passed from hand to hand.

The Incredible Case of Cincy Slim

By HAMILTON CRAIGIE

A prison should be a very safe place for its inmates, and Cincy Slim believed in taking no chances. But he could not know that "The Little Brothers" had arms which could reach behind prison bars and pluck their victims from under the very nose of the Law.

CINCY SLIM was murdered with the connivance of the Law—that much is clear.

But there are other aspects of his incredible story that appear here now for the first time. Taken separately, they are baffling and contradictory; together, they form a perfect pattern, amazing, unbelievable—but true.

Perhaps "assistance" would be a better word than "connivance," but in any event the plot of the strange drama of his taking-off might have been conceived in the brain of one of those medieval Italians who, as De Quincy has it, elevated murder to a fine art.

THE slim, swarthy, dapper man in the expensive Panama and the generally gaudy "scenery" had halted a moment at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street.

Hands in his pockets, he had stood there as if he had nowhere to go and plenty of time in which to do it, but, as a matter of fact, Slim was in a hurry. To a curious observer, there might have seemed something furtive in his quick, jerky glances to right and left.

Nevertheless, he stayed for the moment where he was. He might have been looking for something or somebody, or—somebody might have been "looking" for him. For—to the man who could read it—there was about him a hunted air. More than once, as he sauntered up the Avenue, he had turned his head as if looking for something or some one in the crowd behind.

A passing plain-clothes man had favored Slim, in his expensive Panama and the general getup of a Broadway "sheik," with a hard, appraising stare; but Cincy had appeared not to notice. He had stood, shoulder to shoulder, with the traffic man at the crossing, and had not turned a hair. Plainly he was not apprehensive of John Law.

On the other hand, as he idled there beside the traffic cop, he had appeared to linger, as if he could not make up his mind to move on. Close up, as he had stood hesitating for a moment at the corner of the street, the yegg's face beneath its tan had shown a sudden grayness, a sort of strain. His mouth had twisted for a moment, furtive and mean. He had stood tense for a split second, like a sprinter awaiting the gun.

Three blocks south, if he had but turned his head, Slim might have seen a face swarthy as his own, wolfish. Behind it were others. They sifted nearer, the man in the lead with a wide grin.

But Cincy Slim had not turned his head.

Now, his hand in the pocket of his coat, Slim waited, rigid, his blank stare upon the plate-glass window of a jewelry store just across the street. It was noon, and warm, even for early summer, but the yegg's coat remained tightly buttoned, so that there was a bulge in his side pocket made by his doubled fist. The detective who passed him here had recognized him—and walked on.

"Cincy Slim!" he had murmured under his breath, in the words a shade of admiration, perhaps a little awe. For Cincy Slim—to give the yegg his moniker—had made that name famous in the highways and byways of Chicago and New York; but—they had nothing on *him*. Not the least thing to hang a conviction on, let alone a stretch.

STANDING there on the street corner, he grinned, but without mirth. Nevertheless, he was on the peak, up in the chips: money, plenty of it; immunity from the bulls, a date that evening with a classy broad. Again he smiled his tight smile, his eyes glinted toward the plate-glass window, then, in a lightning side-glance, at the traffic man just beyond.

The plain-clothes man had stopped to talk to the traffic man. Their glances were turned in the yegg's direction, but there was no menace in them—for Cincy Slim. Further away, but nearer now, the dark, grinning face that Slim had not seen was drifting closer. In five more seconds it would have drawn level. The yegg, like a quarter-horse from a standing start, made a sudden lunge forward.

With a quick half-turn, his hand, coming from his pocket, displayed in the sunlight, not a pistol, indeed, but a brick! It crashed like a shot through that plate-glass window as

Cincy Slim, reaching, abstracted with one lightning gesture a tray of gems. Then, headlong, he sprinted down the street.

BEHIND him the pound-pound of the patrolman's brogans was followed by a hoarse oath, a cry.

Cincy Slim was young and in good condition. Ordinarily, he could have given the policeman a block's start and beaten him hands down; and strangely also, in the present instance, he had not depended, for his getaway, on a car.

But now, at the corner of the street, he tripped, stumbled, fell to one knee—and the guardian of the Law was upon him like a thousand of brick. A brief, half-hearted flurry—and Cincy Slim, with everything to be at liberty for, was in the toils.

Cincy Slim had done an insanely foolish thing. He had gotten himself arrested. No one understood exactly how except Cincy Slim—the policeman who had made the collar least of all. In the station house the latter voiced his amazement to the man at the desk.

"He stands there in plain sight, wit' me an' Clancy" (Clancy was the plain-clothes man) "not six foot away—an' thin he heaves a half brick t'rough th' window! An' he almost got away wid it, at that! But I'm thinkin', sorr, he was just plain cuckoo, an' you can lay to that!"

LODGED in his cell in Danoscara, Cincy Slim Hollinger, now Convict 2376, seemed like a man marking time, or just resting, and glad of it.

And that was the truth of the matter, if they had but known it. The swarthy racketer had drawn his first regular breath in weeks at the moment when the prison gates had clanged shut behind him on that gray evening in early spring. A "kite"—prison slang for newspaper—came sliding down the corridor of the cell-block, pulled along by a thread, as was the custom. As it passed his cell door, Slim reached out and grabbed it.

He opened it with fingers that trembled, and his eyes narrowed upon a likeness of—himself. They bulged out as he looked further along the page.

Two faces stared out at him, each with its habitual scowl: Lupo the Wolf and Silk Shirt Tony, the latter known otherwise simply as "The Knife." Gangsters, strong-arms, gorillas, they were known as "The Little Brothers"; Slim knew them as such—as he would have put it: "and how!"

For a moment his dark face changed briefly to a grinning mask. There was no humor in the grin, but for an interval his face was that of a man who sees a ghost; the ghost, perhaps, of himself.

"Hell!" he whispered, under his breath. Then he sat up abruptly, with a jerk. For the story said simply that the two had been picked up, but had made their getaway. What upset him for the moment was that he feared that they were with him, or would be shortly, inside the walls!

But he was as safe as in a church—safer, he told himself. For that they would do as he had done—get themselves sent up in order to reach him, even as he had done, deliberately, to escape their vengeance—he could not believe.

Cincy Slim, "brains" of a mob of which "The Little Brothers" had been the lieutenants, had double-crossed them, no matter how. And Slim had known well enough what it would mean if he should be found out. That was what happened, but he had been wised in time, making his getaway as we have seen—by breaking through that jeweler's window *into* jail.

The yegg made a hideous grimace as, surrendering the newspaper, he saw it slide onward and disappear. That night he slept well for the first time in days.

THE convicts were at exercise in the prison yard. Somehow, in spite of the men on the watch-towers with their loaded rifles, and the guards inside the enclosure with their clubs, there was a sense of grim quiet in that peaceful lockstep, around and around.

In a minute or two the whistle would sound for noon, but the silence seemed like the lull before a storm. The guards themselves may have felt this. One in particular, a big man with a scarred and brutal face, turned to watch as the long line filed past him in review. Perhaps it was because he was a new guard, and strange. The other keepers stood as they were.

It wanted a minute of high noon when, without warning, there rose a sudden scuffle among the close-marching ranks.

At first it was just a movement, a ripple; then, all at once, with the first shrill sound of the whistle, it became a small-sized riot as the guards, running in from right and left, swung their clubs.

An uprising could start like this; it had been done. But as the guards raced forward, with the riflemen waiting on the walls, a man, gray-faced, lashed out at a dozen others crowding him close. It was Cincy Slim.

"Croak him! . . . Croak the snitch! . . . A wooden overcoat for his, th' double-crossin' yellow-belly! . . . *Stool!*"

Cincy Slim was fighting with the desperate, cold courage of the cornered rat. Whatever he might have been, he had never been a snitch, a stool-pigeon, but it was plain that there were certain of the convicts who had been wised, perhaps through the medium of the grapevine telegraph. For here, even in Danoscara, he had not been safe. Cursing, the guards rescued what was left of its intended victim from the mob, by free use of club and fist.

LOOKING like a man who has been in a traffic accident, Cincy Slim was carried away while the guards laid into the sullen prisoners, stir-bugs most of them, with their clubs. The "jam" was over.

As for Cincy Slim, he lay like a dead man upon his hospital cot, staring in tight-lipped silence at the pane. "The Little Brothers" had reached him, and it was only the beginning, he knew.

FOUR men sat in a dingy cellar below the street: the "Brothers"; a third man, a huge, bear-like creature in his dirty dungarees; and the fourth, a man in a derby hat, who tipped backward in his chair, silent, against the wall. Lupo spoke, addressing the third man out of the corner of his mouth, in the prison twist:

"Lissen, bo—we've passed you the folding-money. It's up to you. We've fixed th' right guy, like I said. All you gotta do is *obey th' rules.* Get me?" His grin was like the wide grin of a wolf. "An' that rat Hollinger'll get *what's comin' to him,* understand?"

The big man in the dungarees grinned, nodding like a mechanical mandarin. He had no personal interest in the matter; he was a killer hired for a price. The thing, however, was not so simple as merely hiring this man to bump off Cincy

Slim. And, anyway, Slim was in stir. The Brothers might—again by the grapevine telegraph—have hired some prisoner in Danoscara to kill their enemy, but that would be dangerous, and such was not their way.

But the fourth man, who had so far said nothing, now got to his feet. He too was a big man, but with the unmistakable stamp upon him of the professional politician, the wardman, say, the go-between, the doer-of-deeds under cover and by the left hand. Now he too grinned, speaking in a raspy whisper behind his hand:

"Good enough, you guys! Consider it O. K. Money talks, get me? Well, it'll be all O. K. An' you can smoke that with your cigaret."

He went out, followed by the big man in dungarees. Left alone, the Brothers grinned at each other; then Lupo lifted his glass.

"I drink to the dead, Brother!" he boasted in Italian. "For already, mark you, our enemy is walking in the shadow—he is as good as dead."

BACK in his cell, Cincy Slim lay upon his cot at midnight, prey to uneasy dreams. Released from hospital, he had gone about his work with his head drooping. His masterstroke, if it could be called that, had failed.

Cincy Slim was still alive, but, as he asked himself, for how long? The Brothers had sworn to get him, but where, he reasoned with himself, would be safer than behind prison bars? He had put himself there deliberately. And if his place of safety should prove a trap, what was there that he could do?

Abruptly he sat up, wide awake, listening, holding his breath. A step had sounded from the corridor outside, a slow, stealthy footfall, padpadding in the dimness like a cat's. It was not a guard—or was it? But from the angle of his barred and grated door Cincy Slim could see merely a segment of corridor, with the black shadow of the bars lying diagonally across the floor.

But the sounds passed. And the silence closed in, thick and heavy. And then—there came the quick rasp of steel on steel; the door of Cincy Slim's cell swung open, inch by inch. Out of that cell came Cincy Slim, his face just a blot against the dimness. Something that was just a shapeless shadow bulked huge beside the cowering figure in the door.

There came a quick, hissing whisper and the glint of an automatic, or what looked like it, as it passed from hand to hand. Then the bulky figure in the uniform of a guard, with the drifting ghost that was Cincy Slim ahead of him, passed along the corridor without a sound—out beyond the cell-block, twin shadows in a world of shadows, along the yard, and stopped, finally, beneath the wall.

Beyond that wall was freedom—even if it meant exile in strange lands. When the sentry who paced along that wall-top moved on to the left, Cincy Slim would go up that wall, over it. He had deliberately planned his own arrest and imprisonment, and now he was about to escape that prison. He had doubtless bribed this confederate that he had found among the guards, with a sum that it had been impossible to refuse—and Cincy Slim had money.

THE sentry upon the wall had passed on. A rope, with a grappling iron, thrown over the wall, held. And up this rope Cincy Slim was climbing now, hand over hand.

Like a crab he showed for a moment against the starshine; then, with his hand on the wall-top, he appeared to hesitate—a split second's difference, it might have been, between life and death.

Then, from below, inside the wall, there came a quick, short, barking order—a snarl:

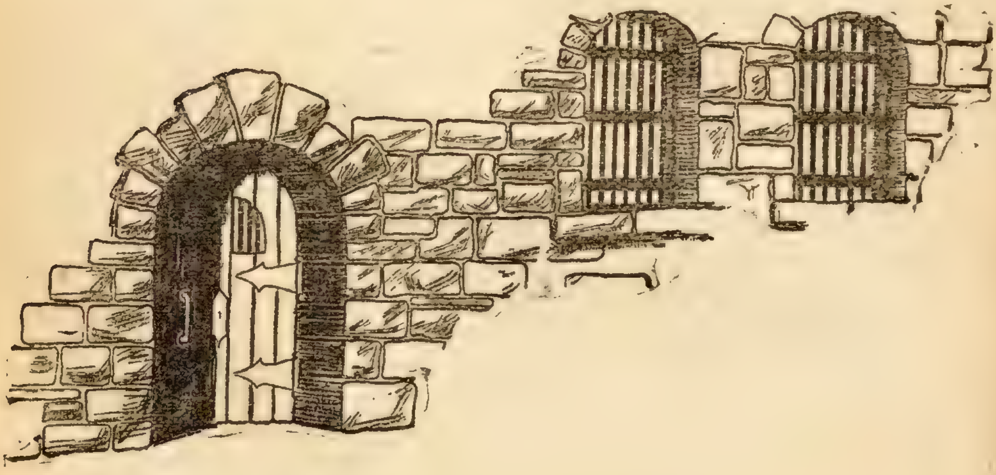
"Stop—or I'll plug you!"

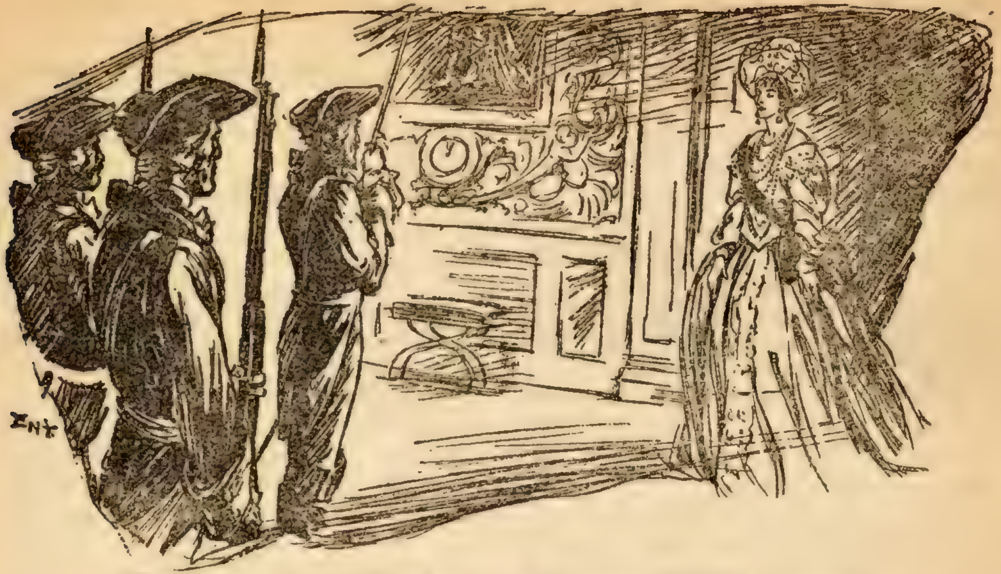
The command, clear and unmistakable, came from the man who had flung that rope above the wall—the man who had waited while Cincy Slim passed out of his cell. And then, while the black figure of the fugitive hung, crouching, upon the wall, there came the crack of an automatic. The crouching figure stiffened, swayed, toppled—to crash backward onto the stones of the prison yard. Cincy Slim was dead.

THE key to the mystery? That a man should deliberately let himself be jailed was strange enough, but the reason has been given. But that the same man should, once in, attempt escape—here was a riddle without an answer.

And yet the vengeance of the Brothers was, as you will see, as subtle in its way as was the escape of Cincy Slim. For the confederate, the guard who had unlocked his cell, furnished him with a gun, helped him above the wall—was no confederate, although it had been he who had suggested the idea of escape to Cincy Slim. "Suggested" is putting it mildly, because the guard was the big man, the man in dungarees. Installed as guard by means ready to the hands of the crafty Brothers, he had opened Cincy Slim's cell door at the point of his pistol, and had forced him to climb the rope—not to liberty, indeed, but to death.

For, standing below, in his capacity as guard, he had, without concealment, shot the fugitive coolly, deliberately, in the act of escape.





The door opened and the ghost of the Empress Elizabeth appeared.

Ghostly Visitants to Royalty

A SERIES

By PRINCESS CATHERINE RADZIWILL

2. The Ghost of the Empress

The Empress Elizabeth Petrovna loved the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg more than anything else on earth. Perhaps that is why the people near her apartments saw, or fancied they saw, her regal ghost thereabouts, from time to time. Whether she came or not, the rumors of her appearance invariably presaged some disaster to the house of Russia's rulers, the Romanoffs.

THE Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, as the capital of the Czars was called, was begun by Peter the Great, who did not live to see it completed. It was his daughter, the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, who took up her father's dream of erecting in his new capital the most handsome and palatial residence that any monarch had ever possessed.

She brought from Italy a famous architect called Rastrelli to help her in her work. It was this Rastrelli who conceived and built most of the wonderful palaces bordering the Neva, which became the admiration of all the foreigners who visited St. Petersburg. His plans in regard to the Winter Palace were not carried out entirely as he would have liked them, owing to a lack of money. It was only after part of it had been burned down in 1837 that the Emperor Nicholas I took up the original ideas of Rastrelli, and completed the huge pile in which the Russian Czars resided when they were in their capital.

THE Empress Elizabeth was devoted to this palace, and never liked to leave it for any length of time. It was there that she had the nuptials celebrated when her nephew and successor, the ill-fated Peter III, was married to the Princess Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst, who in her turn was to occupy the throne of Russia as Catherine II.

And it was there that the great Empress died, saying a few hours before she passed away that the only thing she regretted leaving was the Winter Palace, and that she hoped she would be allowed to return from time to time to see this place of which she had been so fond.

According to the prevailing custom at the Russian Court, the rooms which had been occupied by Elizabeth Petrovna, and in which she had died, were sealed up by the Court Marshal, not to be opened until twelve months had elapsed after her death.

Her successor, the Emperor Peter III, had never liked the Winter Palace, so he retired with his consort to Peterhof on the Baltic Sea. She, however, did not remain there for long, but removed to another imperial residence, the Tsarskoie Selo, while the Winter Palace remained empty, save for the officials who had apartments there the year around, and the officers and soldiers on guard.

And then something extraordinary happened.

One night a Cossack, crossing the square in front of the palace, saw to his surprise and dismay that the windows of the rooms of the late Empress were ablaze with light. Fearing that some malefactors had found their way into the edifice, he aroused the guard which was quartered in the basement of the imperial residence, and related what he had just seen.

The captain on duty then went out and also saw the lights, but decided that he had no right to investigate the matter for himself. So he sought the Master of Ceremonies of the imperial court, Leo Narichkine, who had been a great favorite of Elizabeth Petrovna, and told him the story.

NARICHKINE called several officials, among them the Court Marshal who had sealed the apartment of the Empress with the imperial seal. They all proceeded to the square in front of the palace, from which they saw the windows of the apartment in question illuminated just as they had been during the lifetime of the deceased sovereign. Fairly alarmed, they summoned a company of the Preobragensky Regiment, whose barracks adjoined the palace, and under its escort they repaired through the long corridors to the rooms which, to their knowledge, had not been entered since Elizabeth passed away.

There a great surprise awaited them. The seals which had been put on the doors were found to be intact, and as they stood there, wondering whether they had been the objects of some hallucination, and discussing whether it would not be possible to break into the rooms through a window, these same doors were violently thrown open, and a figure which they all recognized as Elizabeth Petrovna herself, appeared upon the threshold.

Brave as all these men were, they stood before her speechless with fright, and dared not move. The Empress walked straight toward Narichkine, and said quite loudly:

"Something evil is going to happen to Peter. Warn Peter!"

And then she disappeared, and the doors of her apartment slammed to with a bang.

EXACTLY one week later the military revolt took place which ended with the proclamation of Catherine II as Empress of all the Russias. And a few days afterward Peter III was strangled by Orloff at the hunting lodge of Ropscha.

Narichkine wrote down all the details of the apparition which had frightened him so terribly, and he asked the Court Marshal, Prince Odoievsky, to sign it with him, after which the document was handed over to the Custodian of the imperial archives in the Winter Palace.

At the same time, however, Narichkine enjoined a strict secrecy upon the officers and soldiers who, with him, had seen the ghost of the Empress. His great fear was that Catherine II might hear about the occurrence. Which is exactly what happened. She called Narichkine to her and commanded him to relate to her exactly what had taken place. He complied, not without fear, because he knew that the Empress did not care to be reminded of the husband whose throne she had usurped. But Catherine made no remark about it at all, and never alluded to the subject again as long as she lived.

Her son, the mad Paul I, succeeded her, but his reign ended with his being murdered during a palace revolution. He had never lived in the Winter Palace, which he frankly detested, but had taken up his abode in a new one which he had built according to his own taste, and which is to-day the School for Engineers.

As for the Winter Palace, it remained empty except for the fact that the heir to the throne, the Grand Duke Alexander, was allowed the use of a small suite of rooms in it, where he lived with his beautiful wife, the Grand Duchess Elizabeth Alexievna.

ON CHRISTMAS eve of the year 1800, the Grand Duchess, who had attended divine service in the Winter Palace church, returned to her apartment in company with Princess Wolkonsky, her mistress of the robes, two maids of honor, Mademoiselle Noroff and the Princess Golitzyn, and her secretary, Baron Rosen. As it happened, she had to pass the bedroom door of the apartments of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, which had remained unoccupied since the latter's death. To her surprise, she noticed that it was slightly ajar. She had never been inside this room, and, surmising that it was open at the time to be cleaned, she thought that she would go in and have a look at it. But she had scarcely entered when, to her horror, she perceived Elizabeth Petrovna herself standing in the middle of the audience chamber. She wore the imperial crown upon her head, and the imperial mantle of gold brocade lined with ermine on her shoulders, and held the scepter high in her right hand.

The Grand Duchess did not faint,

although both of her maids of honor did. She merely seized the arm of the Princess Wolkonsky, who in her youth had attended upon the Empress, and asked her in a whisper:

"Is it she?"

To which the Princess merely replied with a nod of her head.

THE incident gave rise to much talk at the time, but was kept from the Emperor, for fear that he might be unduly impressed by it. The Grand Duchess, however, wrote an account of it, which was sent to the archives to take its place beside the narrative of Leo Narichkine.

Less than three months later, on the eleventh of March, 1801, the Emperor Paul was murdered and Elizabeth Alexievna became Empress of Russia.

Twice after that the ghost of the old Empress visited the Winter Palace. Once, just before the assassination of the Czar Alexander II by the Nihilists, the Countess Bartenieff encountered it coming out of what was called "the reserved half" of the palace, where foreign royalties were lodged during their visits to the Russian Court. The Countess did not believe in ghosts, but when she suddenly saw the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, dressed as she appears in her life-size portrait which then hung in the Romanoff gallery in the palace, she did not doubt for a moment that she was looking upon the Empress herself, come back to revisit the place she had loved so much.

The Countess wrote an account of the apparition and sent it to be placed among the archives where the other accounts relating to the appearances of the ghost of Elizabeth Petrovna were kept.

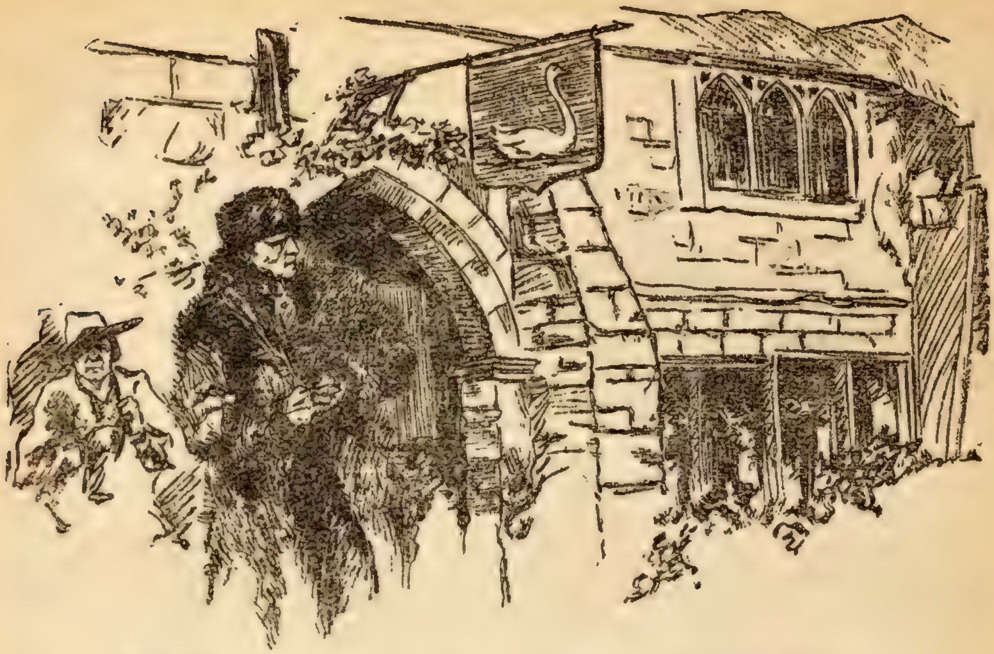
And the Countess became even more convinced of the reality of what she had seen when, one week later, Alexander II was blown to pieces on the Catherine Canal in St. Petersburg.

Thirteen years later all Russia was anxiously awaiting news from Livadia in the Crimea, where Alexander III was slowly dying. A company of Chevaliers Gardes, commanded by an officer called Sabline, was sent to mount guard at the Winter Palace.

It was evening, and the electricity had already been turned on, when the men stationed outside of the big ball-room saw the door open and the ghost of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna appear. She looked so entirely an Empress as she advanced in her elegant court costume, with her powdered hair falling in curls upon her shoulders, that the officer instinctively ordered his men to present arms to her. The Empress slowly passed before them, scrutinizing each one carefully; then she bowed her head in thanks to the officer, and disappeared through the door opposite to the one by which she had entered.

LATER, all the men on guard that day swore to the truth of the incident. And it was narrated in that record of the regiment which contains a daily account of everything that ever happened to it in the old Russia of the Czars.

I do not know whether or not the spirit of the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna has been seen again since this last incident, which took place just a few days before the death of Alexander III. The four incidents which I have related, however, are not only remarkable in themselves but also for the fact that their exactitude has been vouched for by people who are known to be truthful, and not likely to be influenced by superstition.



Bathurst watched a servant put his portmanteau into the carriage.

Famous Unsolved Mysteries

A SERIES

By ALVIN F. HARLOW

16. The Gentleman in the Fur Cloak

Benjamin Bathurst, disguised as a merchant on his return to England from his secret mission to the Austrian Court, feared the uncanny intelligence-system of Napoleon, and sought a body-guard to his port of embarkation. Then he disappeared, as suddenly and as quietly as a breath of wind. Only his gorgeous sable cloak remained behind as a possible key to the mystery, but the key was, strangely, never used. Where was he murdered, and by whom was his body spirited away?

ONCE in a long while the great Master of Destiny seemingly waves a wand, and a human being vanishes from the face of the earth as suddenly, as mysteriously, and as completely as a coin or a playing card from a magician's hand. That the victim is a person of great prominence often does not prevent his being wiped from the plane of human events like a bubble of moisture from a mirror. Such a disappearance occurred in a little town in Germany during the Napoleonic wars more than a century ago, and is as yet unexplained.

At the beginning of the year 1809 the Emperor Napoleon I had reached the height of his power. Italy, the Netherlands, and a large portion of Germany lay under his heel. He had defeated Russia and Austria and had taken away large slices of the latter's territory. But in 1808 he had made his first fatal mistake, when he seized Spain and Portugal and placed his brother Joseph on the Spanish throne. This brought England into the field against him. The British threw an army into Spain, and meanwhile secretly sounded other European countries with a view to organizing a coalition against Napoleon.

During the three years since her last defeat, Austria had lain quiet, though chafing angrily under the loss of some of her important provinces. In the latter part of 1808 her Emperor, Francis, called into service three hundred thousand of the *Landwehr*—citizens of military age. Napoleon, though harassed by the English operations in Spain, angrily demanded of Austria what this meant, but was given an evasive answer. In order to overawe Austria, Napoleon met the Emperor of Russia in conference, and the latter agreed to remain neutral.

ENGLAND greatly desired an attack upon France by some power in central Europe, to draw off some of Napoleon's legions from Spain. Prussia, cowed by Napoleon's victory over her two years before, refused to move. The Austrian Cabinet at the beginning of the year 1809 was still uncertain as to its course.

It was at this juncture that England sent a secret envoy named Benjamin Bathurst to Vienna to urge the Emperor and Cabinet to action. Bathurst was a son of the Bishop of Norwich and a cousin of Earl Bathurst, who was Secretary of State of the Foreign Department. His mission was to assure Austria that England was about to send fifty thousand more troops to Spain, and to do all in his power to encourage Francis and his government to declare war upon France. It was largely due to his efforts that the Cabinet finally threw down the gauntlet to Napoleon, and on April 8th Austrian troops crossed the frontiers into Bohemia, the Tyrol, and Italy.

NAPOLEON was perhaps more exasperated by this fact than by any other incident of his career. With the keen perception of a military genius, he knew that he was in a critical position. Bathurst, in his letters to England, said that the French Emperor bore him, personally, a deadly hatred because of his complicity in the matter, which the spies and secret service of the French had quickly ferreted out. Whether Bathurst's belief was well founded, whether he had actually been warned that Napoleon would, if given an opportunity, wreak vengeance upon him, we do not know. But it is certain from the envoy's letters to his government and his kinsmen and from the testimony of those whom he met in Vienna that he was firmly convinced that Napoleon regarded him with bitter hostility and would lose no opportunity to bring about his destruction.

The French Emperor had not been neglectful of Austria's menace. He was never caught napping. Already four of his great marshals were at the Austrian frontiers with large bodies of men, and most of these now marched directly on Vienna. Within two weeks after the first gesture—that is, in the latter part of April—a series of terrific battles was fought, in which the Austrians held the French at bay. But on July 6, 1809, Napoleon overwhelmed them at Wagram, and Emperor Francis agreed to a humiliating armistice, despite the urgent advice of England through Bathurst and the opposition of Austria's own minister, Metternich.

This armistice was a preliminary to the treaty of peace, which was signed at Schönbrunn in October. Bathurst had remained at the Austrian court all this time, doing what little he could to stiffen the opposition to France; but with the signing of the peace treaty his mission was ended and he was ordered home.

AS HE prepared for the journey he repeatedly spoke of the danger that menaced him and of the probability that Napoleon would try to arrest him before he reached England. He debated for some time whether to go south to Trieste and thence by ship through the Mediterranean, or to try a route through Germany and the North Sea. He decided that the latter was less dangerous and so set out in that direction in November. He journeyed in his own traveling carriage, as all gentlemen did in those pre-railroad days in Europe, particularly when stage-coach service was disorganized by war. Bathurst took with him his private secretary and his valet. To evade observation, he assumed the name of Koch and pretended to be a traveling merchant. He carried pistols on his person, and there were other pistols in the back of his carriage. His secretary, passing under the name of Fischer, was instructed to act as courier—the courier being a functionary who arranged in advance for inn accommodations and relays of horses for the traveling carriage.

In safety the big vehicle spun along, across Bohemia and Saxony and through Brandenburg. In safety the travelers passed through Berlin and some eighty miles beyond Berlin. There they alighted about midday on November 25th at the door of the White Swan Inn, in the little town of Perleburg. A lunch was ordered and some fresh horses to draw the carriage on to Lenzen, which was the next stopping-place. The post-house which supplied the horses was about a hundred paces distant from the inn. By the side of the inn was an old, medieval gate of the town, through which the road led to Hamburg, where Bathurst hoped to take ship for England. Outside the gate was a small suburb, a mere huddle of workmen's cottages.

PERLEBERG is about five miles from the River Elbe, which here flows in a northwesterly direction to Hamburg. The road lay parallel with the river, and here, within the next few hours, Bathurst's danger would be likely to lie, if anywhere; for on the other side of the Elbe lay Saxon territory which was under the dominance of France. We find no record of French troops along the river at the time, though they were in Magdeburg, seventy miles distant.

Bathurst was a handsomely dressed man as he entered the White Swan. He wore a pair of gray trousers, a gray frogged short coat, and over it a rich cloak, or greatcoat, of sable, lined with purple velvet. On his head was a cap of the same fur and lining, while in his scarf was a valuable diamond pin.

His attire was unwisely fine for a man who did not desire to attract attention. He must be a very wealthy merchant, said the gossips along the road.

Once inside the inn, Mr. Koch, as he called himself, decided to order an early dinner, and start on his way immediately after eating. He had been in the house only a few minutes when two Jewish merchants arrived in their carriage from Lenzen—that is, going in the opposite direction from Bathurst — and ordered dinner and fresh post-horses.

Bathurst ate his dinner about four P. M. Whether he saw some one about this time whom he recognized as an enemy, whether a word of warning was whispered in his ear by one of the Jewish merchants or by some one else, we shall never know; but we know that as soon as he had finished his meal he inquired who was in command of the soldiers quartered in the town and where the commander lived. He was told that a squad of the Brandenburg Cuirassiers was there under Captain Klitzing, who lodged in a house behind the Town Hall.

BATHURST hurried across the market-place and called on the officer, who was confined to his room with a swelling in his neck. To Captain Klitzing the visitor did not reveal his true name, but merely said that he was a traveler on his way to Hamburg, and that he had excellent reasons for believing that he was in bodily danger; hence he asked that he might be given a guard in the inn where he was staying. The captain jested at his fears and offered him a cup of tea. A lady who was present noticed that the guest was greatly agitated, shaking so that he could not lift the tea to his lips without spilling it. The captain consented to allow him a couple of soldiers as a guard and ordered them to the inn. Mr. Bathurst then arose and put on his fur coat, making such a bungle of it that he felt it necessary to explain that an incident had recently occurred which had greatly alarmed him.

ON HIS return to the inn he countermanded the order for the horses, telling his secretary that he thought it would be safer to cover the dangerous portion of the road by night, when Napoleon's spies would be less likely to recognize them. For some time he remained in a bedroom at the inn, apparently writing letters and burning papers. At seven o'clock he dismissed the two soldier guards and gave an order for his carriage to be at the door at nine. When that hour arrived, all was ready. The hostler with his horn lantern gave a last look around the harness and strolled back toward the inn. Bathurst stood just outside the door, watching a servant put his portmanteau into the carriage. He then stepped around in front of the horses as if to see that all was right —and vanished! *He was never seen again, alive or dead!*

Remember that it had long been pitch dark. A small lamp across the street emitted only a feeble ray, which did not light up the scene. No one had observed Mr. Bathurst's movements particularly. The postilion stood by the rearmost horse, the valet by the carriage door, the secretary at the inn door, where he had just settled the account with the landlord, who had his cap in his hand, ready to wish the departing gentleman a happy journey. But the gentleman had disappeared. The secretary was impatient, for the wind was cold. They waited and wondered; they sent a servant up to the room which Bathurst had occupied, but he was not there; they called his name aloud, but there was no answer. Suddenly, inexplicably, without a cry or an alarm of any sort, he had been spirited away; and how or why or where he went will probably never be known.

SOME little time elapsed before any one could believe that the matter was really serious. While the whole inn was thus stirred by wonder and perplexity, the two Jewish merchants ordered horses put to their carriage and drove away toward Berlin. The secretary now fancied that his employer might have gone to Captain Klitzing again to ask for guards to attend his carriage. He sent a servant to the captain's house, but Bathurst had not been there. Klitzing, however, instantly recalled the traveler's alarm over his danger, and, despite his swollen neck, he took prompt action. He hurried to the White Swan and put soldiers in charge of the traveler's carriage and all his effects. He put the secretary and valet into a chaise and took them to the Golden Crown, an inn at the other end of the town, where he set a guard over them.

Next morning he made every possible effort to find the lost man. The inn and the post-house were searched, the little River Stepnitz, which flowed near by, was dragged, and woods, marshes, and ditches were combed, but no trace was found. He learned one strange fact: the inn servants were quite sure that when Mr. Bathurst stepped out of the front door and disappeared, he was not wearing his fur coat. And yet the coat had disappeared! Klitzing waited until noon to see if any discoveries were made, then hurried to Kyritz, where his commandant, Colonel Bismarck, was stationed, and from him obtained authority to lay the matter before the Government at Berlin. He had learned from the secretary the traveler's real name, and his being an English envoy rendered his disappearance a matter of grave importance.

But attempts at solving the mystery were hampered by the fact that the military, the municipal authorities, and the police were all jealous and at variance with one another, and devoted more time to wrangling among themselves than to following up essential clues. Some of them, during the first few days, spent more energy in trying to trace the fur coat than its owner. Klitzing and the burgomaster quarreled violently and each preferred charges against the other at Berlin.

WITHIN three or four days after Bathurst's disappearance his fur coat was found hidden behind some firewood in the cellar of a family named Schmidt. Frau Schmidt declared that she had found it at the post-house, and had carried it away and given it to her son, Augustus, a fellow of notoriously bad character. It was a curious thing that a woman living near the inn testified that early in the evening of his disappearance, she had seen the stranger go down the narrow lane in which the Schmidts lived. When questioned, Augustus Schmidt asserted that his mother had told him that the stranger had two pistols, and had sent him to buy some powder for him. He therefore supposed that the gentlemen had shot himself.

UNFORTUNATELY, at this point the whole investigation became tangled because of the conflict among the authorities, and the questions as to how the Schmidts came to know anything about the pistols, whether Frau Schmidt had really sent for powder and whether Bathurst was really seen entering the alley where they lived, were never properly gone into. Whatever information Klitzing obtained was sent to Berlin, where it remains in the archives, unseen by any outsider to this day. The quarrel between the captain and the burgomaster then broke out afresh, however, and caused more delay.

On November 30th, which was five days after Bathurst's disappearance, Klitzing ordered the town magistrates to have all ditches and canals in the vicinity examined; to have the neighborhood explored by foresters with hounds; to drain off the deep stretches of the River Stepnitz through canals and examine its bed; and he added: "As I have ascertained that August Schmidt, who is now under arrest for the theft of the fur coat, was not at home at the time that the stranger disappeared, I require that this fact be taken under consideration and investigated."

But through the jealousy of the town authorities this perhaps valuable clue was not acted upon. As the inn servants declared that Bathurst had not been wearing the coat when he disappeared, and as nothing could be proven against the Schmidts save that they had stolen the coat, Frau Schmidt and her son were sentenced to eight weeks' imprisonment for theft—and there their connection with the case ended.

IT SHOULD be admitted, however, that the authorities made a drastic search for the lost man or anything connected with him. The bed of the Stepnitz was curried over, every pool in the marshes was sounded, every house in Perleburg regarded as suspicious was searched from cellar to attic, every well was looked into, gardens were dug up and drains were cleaned out. The search continued intensively for a week, but not a trace of the envoy was found. It should be mentioned also that the two Jewish merchants who had been at the White Swan on the day of the disappearance were brought back and carefully examined; but they were well-known men of high standing, and there was no evidence whatsoever to connect them with the crime. They claimed to know nothing whatever of any intrigue; but one cannot help wondering whether it was not one of them who warned Bathurst of the doom which threatened him. They might have recognized some French secret agent in the vicinity, and, sympathizing with the hunted man, have tried to put him on his guard.

THE outcry arose at once in England, and was believed in Germany, that French spies had slain Bathurst at the instance of Napoleon. The English government offered a thousand pounds' reward for the solution of the mystery, and Prince Frederick of Prussia, who took a keen interest in the matter, offered a hundred *Friedrichs d'or* for the discovery of the body or for definite information which might lead to a solution. But these rewards were never claimed. Three weeks after the disappearance, however, a bit of evidence was found which seemed to render it certain that Bathurst had been murdered at or near Perleburg.

On the morning of December 16th two poor women went out from the town to a little fir wood some distance northward to pick up fagots for fuel. There, a few paces from a path leading through the forest, they found a pair of gray trousers spread out on the grass. They were turned inside out and were muddy. In one of the pockets was a paper with writing on it; and both paper and garment were sodden with water. The women took the trousers to the burgomaster, and they were promptly identified as the ones which Bathurst had been wearing when last seen. The paper was a half-finished letter scribbled in pencil from the murdered man to his wife. In it he said that he feared he would never reach England; and that if not, his arrest or death would be due to the work of Count D'Entraigues.

Now, this D'Entraigues had been a French spy in London. Whether Bathurst spoke from any definite knowledge or whether he merely surmised that the knowledge which France had of his whereabouts was due to the shrewd work of D'Entraigues in England, it is difficult to say. D'Entraigues himself in later years denied any personal responsibility for the affair. He told Mrs. Thistlethwaite, Bathurst's sister, that he could prove that Bathurst was murdered in the fortress of Magdeburg; but we cannot find that he proved it. If true, then the killing was done by the French, for they were at that time occupying Magdeburg.

THE trousers found by the women in the wood had two bullet holes in them, but there were no traces of blood about the holes, which made it evident that the man was not wearing the trousers when the bullets cut them. This appeared to be a clumsy attempt to make it appear that Bathurst had been attacked by highwaymen and shot in the forest. Another crude effort to divert suspicion was an item which appeared in a Hamburg newspaper on January 23, 1810, when Bathurst had been missing for nearly two months. The item pretended to be a letter from London, dated January 6th, and said:

> Sir Bathurst, Ambassador Extraordinary of England to the Court of Austria, concerning whom a German newspaper under date of December 10th stated that he had committed suicide in a fit of insanity, is well in mind and body. His friends have received a letter from him dated December 13th, which, therefore, must have been written after the date of his supposed death.

Who could have inserted this? It was absolutely untrue, and was palpably an attempt to induce the authorities to believe that Bathurst's supposed disappearance was a hoax, so that they would relax their search. There were several other rumors; for example, that he had been murdered by his valet and that he had been lost on a ship crossing from Germany to Sweden, neither of which could possibly have been true. Some of these stories sounded as if they might have been inspired by some one who desired to cover up the real facts.

AN ENGLISH officer who was a prisoner of war in Paris in 1809 said that both the English and the French authorities there believed that Bathurst's abduction and murder had been committed at the instance of the French government. English newspapers openly charged this, and one of them referred to Napoleon as a "vulgar murderer." Stung by these attacks, Napoleon retorted through the *Moniteur*, the French official journal, that the envoy had evidently become half insane with fear and had committed suicide. "It is the manner of the British Cabinet," the paragraph went on, "to commit diplomatic missions to persons whom the whole nation knows are half fools. It is only the English diplomatic service which contains crazy people." To Mrs. Bathurst, who appealed to him by letter during the following year to tell the truth about the matter, the Emperor earnestly replied that he knew nothing of the affair save what he had read in the newspapers.

In the following April Mrs. Bathurst went to Germany, seeking some clue which would relieve the intolerable agony of suspense under which she had been laboring. While she was in Perleburg, a woman named Hacker, the wife of a peasant who lived in the shoe market, was lying in the town jail charged with a petty theft. The woman sent word to Mrs. Bathurst that she had information regarding her husband and was willing to confess it. Her statement was as follows:

"A FEW weeks before Christmas I was on my way to Perleburg from a place in Holstein, where my husband had found work. In the little town of Seeberg, twelve miles from Hamburg, I met the shoemaker's assistant, Goldberger, of Perleberg, whom I knew from having danced with him. He was well dressed and had from his fob hanging a hair-chain with gold seals. His knitted silk purse was stuffed with *louis d'ors*. When I asked him how he came by so much money, he said: 'Oh, I got five hundred louis and the watch as hush money when the Englishman was murdered.' He told me no more particulars, except that one of the seals was engraved with a name, and he had had that altered in Hamburg."

The authorities gave no credence to this story, and, with their usual cocksureness, did not even trouble themselves to inquire into the whereabouts of Goldberger. They believed that the Hacker woman had concocted the story in the hope of inducing Mrs. Bathurst to interest herself in her behalf, and perhaps to obtain a share of the reward money. But there were people in Perleberg who had another theory which might have borne investigation. Mrs. Hacker's husband had a little place of business where he repaired shoes and sold an occasional jigger of brandy. August Schmidt, already mentioned, was a pretty constant loafer at Hacker's shop. Shortly after this Hacker left Perleberg and located in Altona, where he seemed to possess a great deal of money. It was reported that he had sold a fine gold repeater watch to a jeweler in Hamburg. This rumor was never investigated and may or may not have been true. But some of the Perleberg townsfolk believed that Bathurst had been murdered and robbed by Hacker and Schmidt.

OTHERS had yet a different theory. Opposite the post-house lived a cheap lawyer, a pettifogger, who stirred up quarrels among the peasants and lived by the lawsuits which resulted. He was totally unscrupulous, a man of the worst possible character. Many were confident that he was a spy in the pay of the French. He had been tried once on this charge, but had managed to lie his way out of the mess. Some believed that this man had somehow lured Bathurst across the street and on some excuse or other had gotten him inside the house, murdered him, and buried him in the cellar. Years later the widow of this man appeared anxious on her death-bed to confess something, but her voice was failing and she died before she could tell the story.

On April 15, 1852, a startling discovery was made at Perleberg, which may or may not have had to do with the Bathurst mystery. A house on the Hamburg road belonging to one Kiesewetter, a mason, was being torn down, when a human skeleton was found under the stone threshold of the stable which immediately adjoined it. The skeleton lay stretched out, face upward, on the earth and was covered with bits of dried mortar and stone chips. The back of the skull had been crushed in as if by the blow of some heavy instrument. The house where these remains were found had been purchased in 1834 by Kiesewetter from Christian Mertens, who had inherited it from his father. And at the time of the disappearance of Bathurst, the elder Mertens was the "boots," or bootblack and under-servant at the White Swan!

THE body had evidently been stripped before being hidden, for no shred of clothing, not even a button, was found with the bones. Bathurst's family was notified, and his sister, Mrs. Thistlethwaite, went to Germany at once and saw the skeleton; but, as might have been expected, she was unable to say whether it was that of her brother. By putting this and that together, however, this human fragment might have been the key to the solution of the mystery.

Older citizens were questioned regarding Mertens, and they all remembered that he had been regarded as a steady and pious man, who had died without a stain on his reputation. There had been some surprise, however, when he was able to give his two daughters dowries of one hundred and fifty *louis* and one hundred and twenty *louis* respectively at the time of their marriage. At that time, when the earnings of the poor were infinitesimal as compared with those of to-day, these were astonishingly large sums to be given away by the boots at an inn out of his savings, and still leave him in comfortable circumstances.

The Mertens home was on the Hamburg road just outside the old city gate and not three hundred yards from the inn. Bathurst was walking in that direction when last seen. The boots, like all the other servants, would be hanging around the front door of the inn, hoping for a final tip from the wealthy traveler.

IT IS possible that Mertens lured Bathurst a few paces in that direction by pretending to show him the way out through the gate or claiming to have important information for him. Perhaps a pal—say, Goldberger or Hacker or Schmidt—lay in wait out there in the deep shadows with a hatchet or an iron bar. A man struck a crushing blow on the back of the head usually collapses without a sound. It would have been the work of but a minute to carry the body along the unlighted road to the Mertens cottage.

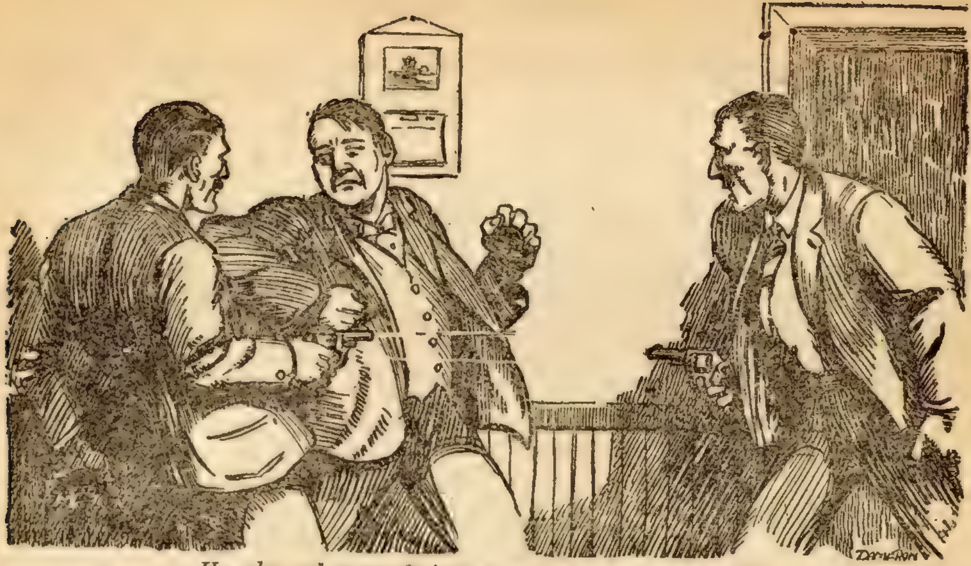
Captain Klitzing never believed that Bathurst had been spirited away by the French, but always insisted that he had simply been murdered for his money. Most of his superiors, however, inclined to the theory of French treachery. But why should Napoleon have desired Bathurst's death? His irritation over Austria's break must have subsided considerably, for he had crushed her in the brief three-months war and secured very favorable terms in the peace treaty. History shows that he was very well satisfied with the outcome of the affair. It does not seem probable that a man with so many great matters on his hands would have troubled himself to pursue a mere envoy who had done no more against him than many another in the tangled diplomatic game then going on in Europe.

BUT there is yet another aspect Napoleon may have been suspicious that Austria was not yet acting in good faith. As a matter of fact, she, like every other country in Europe, was only waiting and hoping for a favorable opportunity to take a hand in smashing France and her Corsican usurper. The French Emperor may have suspected that Bathurst was carrying back to England with him dispatches and documents which would show Austria's real intentions—and he would be eager to lay hands on those papers. To get possession of them he would not be apt to order the envoy slain; he would probably direct that he be held up and robbed as if by highwaymen for his money. It was the belief of German government officials that the affair happened in this way, and that the killing of Bathurst was perhaps accidental — a clumsy piece of work on the part of the robbers. Who knows but that Mertens and possibly two or three others were hired to do the job and were paid with French gold?

Such questions as these may never be answered. At any rate, it must have given Earl Bathurst, then Secretary of State for War, a bit of grim satisfaction six years after the disappearance of Benjamin, when he signed the order condemning to lifelong exile on a lonely island the former mighty Emperor who, as he firmly believed, had brought about the death of his cousin.

An Insane Method of Curing Insanity

IN ancient times people who were insane were supposed to be possessed of devils and were put to the most inhuman tortures, with the idea of driving the devils out. One method followed in Ireland was to bury the insane person for three days and three nights in the earth, with only his head sticking out. A trench was dug three feet wide and six feet deep, and the unfortunate man or woman put into it. No food was allowed him during his burial, and no person could approach or speak to him. If he were still alive at the end of this terrible ordeal, he was dug up and taken out, more dead than alive, and frequently more insane than ever, though it is said that in some instances this horrible method of cure was really effective in bringing the patient to his senses.



He glanced around, into a second menacing muzzle.

Removals, Unlimited

By R. E. ALEXANDER

Walter Keedy felt unseen eyes gazing at him menacingly, and invisible hands groping for him. Everything had suddenly taken on a threatening aspect. But an idea, born of his fear, solved the problem of Ecks, Wye, and Zedd.

WALTER KEEDY, Real Estate and Investments, 1418 Central Building, stared, wide-eyed, at the neatly-typed lines of the letter he had just lifted from the little heap of opened mail before him. His smooth-shaven, round face flushed hotly red as he banged a plump fist down on the desk-top.

"What the dickens does this mean? Some idiot's idea of a joke, I suppose. Oh, Miss Ryan, do you know anything about this letter from 'Removals, Unlimited'?" he bawled at his secretary-typist in the outer office.

"Why, no, Mr. Keedy," that efficient young lady answered. "I suppose it came with the regular mail. I didn't notice it. Why?"

"Why, it's a—— Oh, well, never mind. I'll attend to it."

He reread the epistle slowly. It might be the opening gun of some advertising campaign. It might be—but some instinct told Walter Keedy that it was only too real.

The sheet of heavy linen paper had neither address nor date-line for heading; only the words in capitals: REMOVALS, UNLIMITED; then:

> MR. WALTER A. KEEDY.
> DEAR SIR:
>
> We are billing you for twelve thousand ($12,000) dollars, which is our usual one-tenth levy upon the inheritance of a client—in your case, the estate of your deceased uncle, Mr. Henry K. Bennings, removed by us, N. E. corner, Jessup and 86th Sts., City, 7:51 P. M., Tuesday, September 12th last, via our car No. 2.
>
> You will no doubt recall expressing a wish to use our service in our agent's hearing — the Paddock, Saratoga Springs, 2:26 P. M., August 18th last. The exact wording of your commission, taken from our files, is: "I wish to Heaven the old skinflint" (referring to your Uncle Henry) "would pop off soon and let me get my hands on some real dough."
>
> Investigation by our Mr. Wye having revealed a situation worthy of our attention, we acted as above stated, to your entire satisfaction, we have excellent reason for believing. We have not yet reached our goal of anticipating a client's wish, but we are sure you will agree with us in saying that we are one hundred per cent perfect in our fulfilment of a client's wish.
>
> The laborer being admittedly worthy of his hire, we feel sure that you will not object to withdrawing from your bank at once the above-mentioned sum in cash, and having the same on your person when our Mr. Zedd calls upon you within the ensuing ten days. Our Mr. Zedd will be known to you by his statement of our motto: "We do a good job neatly and with despatch."
>
> We assure you of our entire willingness for you to call in the police if you feel the need of a witness to our little extra-legal affair, but we must regretfully warn you that any difficulty we may experience in the collection of our just due will be charged against your account for later collection.
>
> Thanking you for your favor, and hoping that you will remember us should you decide that it would be better for Aunt Esther to follow in Uncle Henry's footsteps, we are
>
> Yours very truly,
> MR. ECKS,
> for REMOVALS, UNLIMITED.

HIS uncle, Henry K. Bennings! He had an Uncle Paul Hitchcock and an Uncle Ezra Keedy, but there was certainly no Henry K. Bennings in the circle of his kin or acquaintances. Nor had he an Aunt Esther.

The Paddock, Saratoga Springs? He had heard of Saratoga Springs, of course, but he had never been within hundreds of miles of the place. He supposed a paddock had some connection with a race-course, but he had never seen one.

August 18th—August 18th? He consulted a desk-calendar and suddenly flushed red. Why, hang it all, he had spent August 18th at the shore with a friend, if anybody should ask him!

Mr. Keedy scowled at the thing, suddenly tore it across and cast the halves into the waste-basket as one casts from oneself a noxious insect. Then, almost instantly, he stooped, retrieved the pieces, thrust them back into the envelope in which they had come, snatched up his hat, and hurried from the office.

Inspector Jerry Shean, of the Detective Bureau, looked up from his desk at Headquarters and eyed his visitor in some surprise.

"Why, hello, Walter! What are you doing down here at this time of day? Any of your pals pinched last night—or have you been speeding again?" he asked lightly.

Mr. Keedy sank into the indicated chair and spoke hurriedly, for he knew that the Inspector was a busy man at that hour of the morning.

"No—no, nobody's been pinched in my crowd. I—I—well, I suppose you'll tell me I'm a fool for wasting your time on a joke or an advertisement, but I thought you could tell me if there's anything in this. It reads like—like——"

He fumbled embarrassingly with the letter which he had taken from his pocket.

The Inspector smiled and thrust out a hand.

"Well, let's have a look at your mare's nest."

Mr. Keedy rid himself of the missive with real relief.

The Inspector leaned comfortably back in his swivel-chair and ran keen eyes over the letter. As he read he stiffened to attention, reread it with care, and looked up to stare accusingly at the fidgety Mr. Keedy.

"Where did you get this?" he asked curtly.

"Why, it came in this morning's mail," Mr. Keedy made haste to answer. "Is it——"

"Well, aren't you going to pay for Uncle Henry's—er—removal?" demanded the Inspector.

Mr. Keedy exploded.

"Uncle Henry! I never had an Uncle Henry! I don't know any Bennings! I've never been to Saratoga Springs! What do you mean—pay?"

The Inspector smiled, waving a placating hand.

"All right, old man. Now keep your shirt on while I do a bit of digging."

HE PRESSED a button.

"Get me all the dope you can on"—he referred to the letter—"on Henry K. Bennings, accident case, September 12th last," he instructed the subordinate who instantly appeared.

"They got my name wrong, too," Mr. Keedy pointed out to the Inspector, as they sat waiting. "My middle initial is W—Walter Warren Keedy."

"Yes, yes," the Inspector said absently, his eyes—and thoughts—still intent upon the document.

Mr. Keedy suddenly sat up with a sharp exclamation.

"By Jingo! I wonder, now—where were my brains? I might 'a' known it was he! Jerry, there's a Walter A. Keely in the same building, on the sixteenth floor. I'm on the fourteenth. I bet you there's been a mistake in the address!" he cried.

"H'm, very likely," grunted the Inspector. "Do you know this bird? What does he do?"

"No, I don't know him—I don't know what he does. I just remember seeing his name on the board at the entrance. It's next to mine, you know; Keedy—Keely."

"H'm. Yeah, it looks like——"

HE WAS interrupted by the entrance of the subordinate, who handed him a typed sheet of paper and then slipped out.

The Inspector looked up at Mr. Keedy.

"This is—interesting," he said dryly. "Listen."

He read slowly from the typed slip:

> "Henry K. Bennings: Leather merchant, sixty-two, widower, no children. Residence: 67A N. Eighty-sixth Street, City. Office: 105 Albemarle Building, City. Struck by an unidentified motorcar, Eighty-sixth and Jessup Streets, 7:50 P. M., Tuesday, September 12th. Died Northwestern Hospital, 10:20, same date. Coroner's Jury verdict: Accidental death. Next of kin: Walter A. Keely, 1612 Central Bldg. Same residence address."

The two men looked into each other's eyes.

"I think I'd better investigate this. There's been a lot of accidents like that lately," announced the Inspector, rising and reaching for his cap. "Any objection to my being along when you hand Mr. Walter A. Keely his letter—with your apologies for having opened it by mistake?" he demanded.

Mr. Keedy grinned feebly.

"Believe me, I'm gonna need you," he said.

A LITTLE crowd stood about the entrance to the Central Building, staring.

"Looks like something's happened while you were away," commented the Inspector. "Maybe 'our Mr. Wye' has been keeping an eye on things, and they've discovered their mistake and are trying to mop up."

He sprang from the car with Mr. Keedy at his heels, and shoved through the gaping semicircle about the doorway. A harassed doorman greeted Mr. Keedy and glanced curiously at the Inspector.

"All right, officer. . . . 'Morning, Mr. Keedy. Terrible, ain't it?"

"What's t-terrible?" stammered Mr. Keedy.

"What's the trouble?" demanded the Inspector.

"Why—why, it's that nice young Mr. Keely. He fell or jumped from a window of his office on the sixteenth. Landed right over there on the sidewalk—smashed like an egg!"

The doorman was plainly reveling in horrors.

Mr. Keedy's knees knocked together. "Removals, Unlimited," had discovered their mistake and had started to remove the evidence. He would probably be the next. He gripped the Inspector's arm.

"My God, Jerry, they'll be after me, too! What'll I do?"

"Shut up, idiot!" the Inspector hissed in his ear. "Don't get the idea that you're an extra edition."

Throwing off Mr. Keedy's hand, he caught that gentleman's elbow and rushed him through the chattering mob into the lobby to a waiting elevator.

"Sixteenth, boy, and step on it," he snapped at the operator.

The boy glanced at the uniform and shot the car aloft.

An officer who had been listlessly poking about in the late Mr. Keely's two-room suite could tell the Inspector nothing more than he already knew—that its late occupant had fallen or jumped from the open window of the inner office. The policeman had found nothing to bolster his theory of suicide, and was sure that he needed nothing.

"No, there was nothin' outa the ordinary in the mail—it's all over there on the desk. Mostly circulars; no bills, nothin' from a sweetie. Looks to me like he had a hang-over an' just jumped—or maybe he got dizzy," the officer said doubtfully.

The Inspector was expertly going over the window. There was no visible mark on it. He turned to the idly-watching patrolman.

"That'll be all, Doherty. I'll take care of this. Go back to your beat."

THE officer saluted and oozed out by a door which opened directly onto a cross-corridor.

The Inspector stared speculatively at this second doorway, then turned to Mr. Keedy, who was quivering in a chair.

"Brace up, old man," he said, grinning broadly. "They haven't got you yet. Don't jump till you hear something ticking! I got to admit they're fast workers, though," he said almost admiringly. "They must mean to gather up what feathers were left around when that little job of mailing was bungled. Well, we'll see."

He ran through the little heap of letters on the desk. There was nothing from "Removals, Unlimited."

Popping into the outer office, where an ashen-faced girl huddled over her machine, he asked: "Did Mr. Keely have any visitors this morning? You're his stenographer, I suppose?"

The girl lifted a swollen, tear-stained face.

"Yes. No, there was no one. Oh, please, can't I go?"

"Yes, indeed; we'll send you home in a minute or two. I just want you to answer one or two questions. You're quite sure about there being no visitors? You were here all the time?" he demanded.

"Yes, of course I was. There was nobody—excepting a window-cleaner. He washed that window over there and then went in to do the one in the private office. I heard him ask Mr. Keely if it would be all right. Mr. Keely said: 'Sure, go ahead.' That was about fifteen minutes before — before ——" and she broke down, sobbing.

"AH, YES! A window-cleaner, eh? About fifteen minutes before——" Hunting fires were lighted in the deep-set, gray eyes. "Did you see him come out again?"

"Why, no. I suppose he went out the other door, into the side hall," the girl said.

"Quite so. Do you remember what he looked like? Had you ever seen him before?"

The girl started, stared.

"You don't think——? I don't remember seeing him before. He must have been a new man," she said slowly. "He was a young man, I think—or maybe he was middle-aged. Kind of between, I guess. I think he had a mustache—but I'm not sure. He—he was just a window-cleaner. I didn't pay much attention."

"I see," agreed the Inspector wearily. "He was wearing?" he suggested.

"Why—why, whatever it is they wear — something white; overalls and—and a cap, I think."

"Exactly. A very good description of *a* window-cleaner, but unfortunately it's *the* window-cleaner I'd like to meet," remarked the Inspector. "Do you know if Mr. Keely ever had a letter from, or have you ever typed a letter to, a party or firm called 'Removals, Unlimited'?" he asked.

The girl thought a moment.

"N-no, I don't think so—I'm sure not."

"Did Mr. Keely seem worried this morning? Did he act or look at all unusual?" he asked.

"No—no, indeed!" she cried. "He was laughing when he came in. He —he——"

She was sobbing again.

The Inspector waited for her to recover.

"Ever hear of a Mr. Ecks?" he snapped at her.

"No, but I've seen 'Madame X,'" she said hopefully.

"I think you can go home now," the Inspector replied dryly.

"I'd better see the building superintendent and see if he knows anything about his window-cleaners," announced the Inspector, after a moment of deep thought. "Where's he hang out? You can come along, Keedy, if you like."

"On the first floor, in the rear. I—don't you think it would be a good idea to stop at my office and see if—if they—if they——"

Mr. Keedy seemed unable or unwilling to clothe his horrid suspicion in words.

THE Inspector started for the door.

"Come on," he snapped. "That's just what they'd do! I ought to have my head examined! Nobody there but your stenographer, I suppose? Oh, they wouldn't bother her," he said soothingly, as Mr. Keedy started violently.

Mr. Keedy sighed his relief as they stepped inside his office-door and Miss Ryan smiled up at him, unruffled and apparently unaware of the nearby tragedy.

"Anybody call while I was away?" he asked quickly.

"No, Mr. Keedy. Your wife called up, but I told her you——"

"Did a window-cleaner come in here?" interrupted the Inspector.

"Why, yes, sir. I supposed it was all right to let——"

The two were not listening; they had rushed for the closed door leading to the inner office. Thrusting Mr. Keedy behind him, the Inspector stood well to one side of the doorway, put out a long arm to the door-knob, gripped it, and suddenly flung the door all the way back upon its hinges.

No pistol barked at them, no bomb roared. Nothing happened.

The two men grinned sheepishly at each other and stepped through the open door.

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Keedy.

The Inspector grunted.

The room was a chaos of littered papers. The desk and files had been thoroughly ransacked and their contents scattered everywhere.

The Inspector whirled upon the open-mouthed girl, who was staring over their shoulders.

"How long was that chap in here?"

"Why—about fifteen minutes, I think. He went out whistling. I supposed it was all right. I didn't bother to watch him. I knew you never kept anything of value in the desk, Mr. Keedy, and—and he seemed just a window-cleaner," the girl said apologetically.

They could extract little of value from her. Her description of the man was as vague as had been her professional sister's effort. A window-cleaner had come and gone—whistling. That was the sum of her knowledge.

They did not bother to tell her of his bloody wake.

THE Inspector turned to the telephone.

"I'll have them send Wiggins and Connolly right up. I'll be needing them if we pick up a trail."

When the necessary instructions had been given, the Inspector led the way to the elevators.

"All the way down," he told the boy, who looked at them inquiringly as they stepped within.

The door clanged to, and instantly the car dropped. It seemed to fall away beneath their feet as it plunged, out of control, down the shaft on its way to the sub-basement some hundred and fifty feet below.

Mr. Keedy cried out hoarsely, the Inspector swore, and the operator stuttered a prayer while he worked frantically at his useless levers.

Crash! They were hurled together in a heap upon the floor as the car jammed between the first and second floors.

After a few seconds the Inspector scrambled up and dragged the dazed Mr. Keedy to his feet.

"Two fumbles already in to-day's game. They'd better give somebody else the ball!" quoth the indomitable officer. "Well, boy, how much do you get for it?" he demanded of the quaking operator.

It required almost two hours of intensive effort to free them from their safe but uncomfortable prison. The elevator-boy was a limp, wet rag of a mortal from the heat of the third degree to which the Inspector had subjected him—to small profit, for it was soon evident that he was no more than an unwilling participant in their ride.

That it was a deliberate attempt at murder was soon made clear when they were told that marks of both saw and acid had been found on the car's supporting cable.

The Inspector's thin lips tightened as the agitated superintendent told him this. It was fast becoming a personal matter between Inspector Jerry Shean and "Removals, Unlimited."

The superintendent could tell them very little. But an inquiry revealed that a regular member of the window-cleaning staff was missing. Yes, he had reported for duty that morning. Oh, quite a reliable fellow. He had been with them five years or more, and never had a black mark. The superintendent recoiled in horror from the Inspector's scarcely veiled suspicion.

A SEARCH of the building revealed the missing man tucked away in the closet of a vacant office, bound and gagged and stripped to his underwear. His uniform and equipment—used and discarded by his impersonator—lay beside him.

He could only tell them that he had heard a light step behind him, had seen all the galaxy of stars, and had known nothing until consciousness returned to him in the closet.

It was some hours later when the Inspector appeared in Mr. Keedy's office to say: "Come on, old man. Send this young lady home, and let me take you home in my car. It's not too far out of my way."

His hours of research, it seemed, had not been entirely unproductive.

"Yeah, it begins to look like we've uncovered something big. This Keely bird had been playing the ponies, the market—anything he could get a couple of bucks on. He was at Saratoga, August 18th, all right. He was in debt to his ears when his uncle cashed in. There's an Aunt Esther, too—just rolling in money. Everything fits in."

Mr. Keedy was very willing to have official company on his homeward way. His ears had been pricked up and his eyes had been roving from door to window and back again all the long afternoon. What if "Removals, Unlimited," made it a rule to try, try again?

He voiced his fears to the Inspector when the latter had worked the car into an opening in the line of traffic and they were moving northward, with the two detectives following them in another car.

The Inspector pooh-poohed his friend's fears.

"They won't try again to-day. I'd say they've already done a fair day's work. I'll post a good man to watch your place to-night, and maybe they'll walk into a trap. And I'll have a man out there to trail you down in the morning."

Mr. Keedy was about to voice his distaste at being used for bait, when events proved the Inspector to be the poorest kind of prophet. A great truck came hurtling at them from a cross-street, smashed into them, and sent the Inspector's roadster whirling into a lamp-post, to topple over upon its side a crushed and battered thing.

Mr. Keedy found himself sprawled at full length upon a suddenly crowded sidewalk, flung clear of the wreck. Busy hands were dragging a furiously cursing Inspector from the ruins of his car. Miraculously, it seemed, neither of them had suffered more than some superficial cuts and bruises.

The truck stood abandoned by its driver, and investigation disclosed that it had been stolen late that afternoon, while it was parked far down-town. The two detectives had fired at the fleeing driver, with no result other than to accelerate his pace. The man had escaped down an alley, swallowed up in the fast-gathering dark.

The two men packed themselves into the detectives' car and drove warily on to Mr. Keedy's home, which he was surprised to find intact. The Inspector was in a thoughtful mood.

MR. Keedy stepped from the car, thanked the Inspector, heard him say he'd send a man around from the nearest station right away, thanked him again, and started across the sidewalk.

And on the instant a limousine that had been rolling slowly down the street toward them, suddenly leaped like a living thing, and charged up onto the sidewalk and down upon him.

Only his nervous watchfulness saved him. He jumped wildly even before the Inspector yelled, and fell into comparative safety behind the stone steps as the detectives' pistols began to bark. The great car roared past him, scraping his heels, and tore on down the street.

Crouching there on hands and knees, he watched the futile pursuit, thanking his stars that it was his wife's afternoon for bridge. The limousine suddenly swerved aside into a side-street, and its driver abandoned it and fled up an alley, escaping through a hail of lead.

The limousine, too, was found to have been stolen but an hour or two earlier.

"Well, this is getting interesting," commented the Inspector, returning. "But don't worry, old man, I'll send two of my best men around, and leave Wiggins and Connolly here till they come. Wiggins can bring you down in the morning. I don't see how they can pull off one of their accident stunts as long as you stick to the house—and I'd stay in to-night, if I were you," he added, grinning.

"You bet your life I will!" Mr. Keedy said shakily.

Mr. Keedy slept very little that night. He wakened far too often to strain his ears listening for stealthy footsteps outside his locked and bolted door, the squeak of a softly raised window, or the creak of a stair beneath a furtive foot.

He finally abandoned sleep altogether and set himself to puzzling over the problem of what sort of camouflage an organization like "Removals, Unlimited," would use to present a clean and shining face to a gullible public as a shield for its darker activities.

Society! That must be his avenue of approach. Since it was formed to batten upon the rich, such an organization must have some means of observation and knowledge of its clientele; otherwise how could they know whom to pick for victims, whom to bespatter with their bloody service?

Mr. Keedy considered bootleggers, lawyers, beauty-specialists, private detectives—a score of possible "listening posts"—and decided against them all as having too few tentacles. He needed something which would cover Society like a blanket; would know its most closely guarded secrets, and have a means of access to its innermost sanctums as well as to its farthest fringe of hangers-on.

Then he sat bolt upright in bed as his answer came to him: a society weekly would be just the thing! Some of these publications fed upon the gossip brought them by maid and butler, footman and valet, waiter and gigolo, impecunious matron of the gambling set or penniless man-about-town, and even upon those of the elect who were willing to trade this or that sorry tale for thirty pieces of gold—or silver.

Mr. Keedy decided to set about trying to support his suspicions with a bit of proof at once. He would show his pal, the Inspector, that he was something more than the Watson of the partnership.

HE BREAKFASTED in a leisurely manner, and allowed the plain-clothes man who appeared to shepherd him to the office. There, to his guardian's horror, Mr. Keedy insisted upon walking up the sixteen flights of stairs. He ran through his mail, turned it over to Miss Ryan, and headed for the Library, with the officer doggedly at his heels—down the sixteen flights.

Mr. Keedy was taking no chances with an elevator while "Removals, Unlimited," remained unscotched.

Deep in a newspaper directory, he suddenly stiffened to attention. Surely this was more than coincidence:

> *Tattletales*, Society weekly. Published, 21A Anthony Street, by Tattletales Publishing Company. Mr. Anders Eckstrom, Publisher and President. Vice-President and Editor, Mr. Reginal Wye. Secretary-Treasurer, Mr. Arthur Shedd.

Mr. Keedy copied it and paused to play with those names a bit. Slashed across its middle, Eckstrom was the perfect Ecks. A diphthong exchanged for a letter, and Shedd was Zedd. No need to meddle with "our Mr. Wye."

The investigator rose in mounting excitement and hurried to the street to hail a taxi.

"21A Anthony," he told the driver, waving the detective into the car ahead of him, "and step on it, buddy."

He debated the wisdom of sharing his knowledge or suspicion with his guardian, and decided against it. He might, of course, be all wrong, and *Tattletales* a harmless enough publication, with an impeccable staff, but Mr. Keedy had a hunch that he'd shortly have a tale to tell the Inspector which would more than atone for all the latter's gibes at his past attempts at Sherlocking.

21A Anthony Street was a three-story business building, with a garage flanking it on one side and a pool-room on the other. An ideal location, Mr. Keedy decided, since it would be easy—and very useful—for "Removals, Unlimited," to own and run both businesses.

HE STARED up at the sign above the garage's open door: "Excelsior Garage. A. Eckstrom, Prop." Here was confirmation for his theory. Mr. Keedy thrilled to his rubber heels.

The taxi halted before the door of 21A. Mr. Keedy spoke briefly to his companion:

"Listen—I'm going in here alone. If I don't show up in fifteen minutes, you get in touch with the Inspector and tell him to get busy. But be sure to give me the full fifteen minutes."

The detective started.

"Wait a minute! What's the big idea? Say, I got orders not to——"

But Mr. Keedy had disappeared indoors, leaving the door open behind him.

The detective hesitated, staring after him. Then he suddenly stepped from the farther side of the car and ran across the street to a drug store on the corner. He spent two busy minutes in a telephone booth, then returned to the car and entered it without having been missed by the somnolent driver.

Mr. Keedy found no one in the outer office. Voices sounded behind a closed door in the rear. He rapped upon it. A moment of dead silence followed, and then it opened slowly.

Two piercing black eyes stared into his.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm looking for the editor of *Tattletales*," Mr. Keedy said glibly. "Could I see him, please?"

The hard eyes appraised him and seemed satisfied. The door was opened wide.

"I am Mr. Wye, the editor. Will you come inside, Mr.——?"

"Jenkins," supplied the pleased Mr. Keedy, stepping briskly within and taking the chair which the other indicated. "I have a bit of news I thought you might care to print in your interesting paper, which we all read at The Towers. I'm Mrs. Montgomery Gallup's butler, you know. Of course you know Mrs. Gallup. She really sets the pace for the younger set."

His eyes were busy as he rattled on. There was no sign of another presence in the sparsely furnished room. Yet Mr. Keedy knew that he had heard at least three men talking when he knocked. His proofs were piling up, stone by stone; for why should reputable business men play hide-and-seek with a chance comer?

"Yes—yes, Mr.—er—Jenkins, and just what have you for us to-day? We might be able to use some interesting bit of news, and should be glad, of course, to remunerate you properly if it should be found of sufficient interest to warrant our featuring it," Mr. Wye said unctuously.

Mr. Keedy burst into a juicy tale of a supposed peccadillo of his mistress, while Mr. Wye scribbled furiously upon a pad before him. He was going strong when a buzzer sounded an imperative summons.

Mr. Wye held up a slim, white hand.

"A moment, please."

He stepped quickly to a half-concealed door in the side wall, and, opening it, passed through.

Mr. Keedy fidgeted, feeling furtive eyes upon him. More than half of his fifteen minutes had gone, and he had learned very little. He had hoped to meet the three of them, Mr. Ecks and Mr. Zedd as well as Mr. Wye.

Then Mr. Wye appeared in the opening, with a queer smile upon his saturnine face. A figure loomed behind him and stepped into the room close upon his heels. It was a giant of a man, fair-haired and blue-eyed—evidently of Danish blood. Mr. Keedy realized that his wish was being fulfilled. He was meeting Mr. Ecks.

MR. WYE smiled darkly upon him.

"Our President, Mr. Ecks-trom. He is so pleased to see you here, Mr.—er—Keedy! We were just sending for you, you know."

Mr. Keedy started to his feet.

"I—I don't know what you mean," he stammered. "My name is——"

"Walter Keedy," the giant said coldly, and added Mr. Keedy's home and office addresses. "I regret that you should have chosen to take advantage of our little mistake and meddle in our business. It forces us, of course, to deal harshly with you. Will you be good enough to step this way?"

He was indicating the door in the wall, and the indicator was a pistol which had suddenly appeared in his huge hand. Mr. Wye had sidled around and was now at his back. Mr. Keedy glanced around, into a second menacing muzzle.

A terrific crash resounded from the street.

"I'm afraid a sad accident will deprive you of the pleasure of seeing your companion again, unless of course, you should chance to meet in the river," Mr. Ecks said pensively.

Mr. Keedy suddenly went berserk. He'd meet nobody in the river! He'd die right there if necessary! He flung himself backward upon Mr. Wye, and two pistols barked together. A sharp knife seemed to be drawn across Mr. Keedy's ribs, but he was inextricably mixed up now with Mr. Wye and battling furiously, so he paid no attention to his wound.

There was a rush of feet, and a dozen sinister figures were in the room. Mr. Keedy, supposing that it was the end, clung all the tighter to his opponent. Hands were tearing at him, striving to break his death-grip upon the wriggling, cursing Mr. Wye.

"Don't shoot—don't shoot! Too noisy," some one was hissing. "Use a knife if you have to, but try an' get him alive. I want to see how much he knows."

THEY crashed together over a chair and were hauled erect—together. Fists were beating at his face, but he buried it deep in his opponent's neck. With one eye still unclosed he suddenly saw before him the open doorway to the street. The fight had somehow been transferred to the outer office. With all the strength of a maddened, desperate man, Mr. Keedy hurled himself and Mr. Wye across the room and through the door, before the others saw the danger and could block him. They crashed down the steps and sprawled upon the sidewalk, still locked together.

There was a rush of feet behind him, another rush from the garage, and then the fainting Mr. Keedy heard the sweetest music of all his life—the harsh voice of the Inspector bawling: "Go get 'em, boys! Leave this one to me."

A column of blue-clad figures swept over them, clubs rose and fell. Thwack! Thwack! Thump! Pistols barked viciously. Engines raced and roared as cars erupted from the garage, to dash away through a hailstorm of bullets.

Boom! The windows of the building at their backs crashed out, and clouds of green and yellow smoke billowed through the openings. Boom! Boom! A second explosion, then a third. Great tongues of orange flame were licking through the smoke-clouds. Walls were bulging, cracking, crashing down.

The police were hurriedly falling back, carrying with them the half-dozen prisoners whom they had reaped from the battle.

BOOM! The garage transformed itself before their dazzled eyes into a stupendously active volcano.

Fire apparatus was clanging down upon them from all directions. A swiftly-gathering crowd was pressing in upon them. The Inspector was swearing magnificently, supporting a sadly battered but increasingly conscious Mr. Keedy upon his arm, while with the other hand he gripped fast a chastened Mr. Wye.

"Hell's bells! They were certainly all set for a getaway!" the Inspector snorted. "Well, we got some of them—and we'll get more. Doggone you!"—he was addressing Mr. Keedy, who was desperately trying to stand alone—"what do you mean by bustin' into my game like this? You might 'a' got hurt! Who's the guy you stuck to like a big brother?" he demanded.

"'Our Mr. Wye'!" Mr. Keedy crowed weakly. "Did you get the tall guy—Mr. Ecks?" he asked anxiously.

The Inspector was regretful.

"No, he got away. Zedd too, I guess. We grabbed most of the small fry. Two cars got away."

The prisoner struggled feebly as he came back to a club-haunted consciousness, and the Inspector shook him like the rat he was.

"Be good, fella, be good, or I'll rap you again. You're 'our Mr. Wye' now, you know!"

"For how long, I wonder!" the fellow snarled.

"Till we can fix you up a chair," said the Inspector grimly.

◆

The Fairy Island

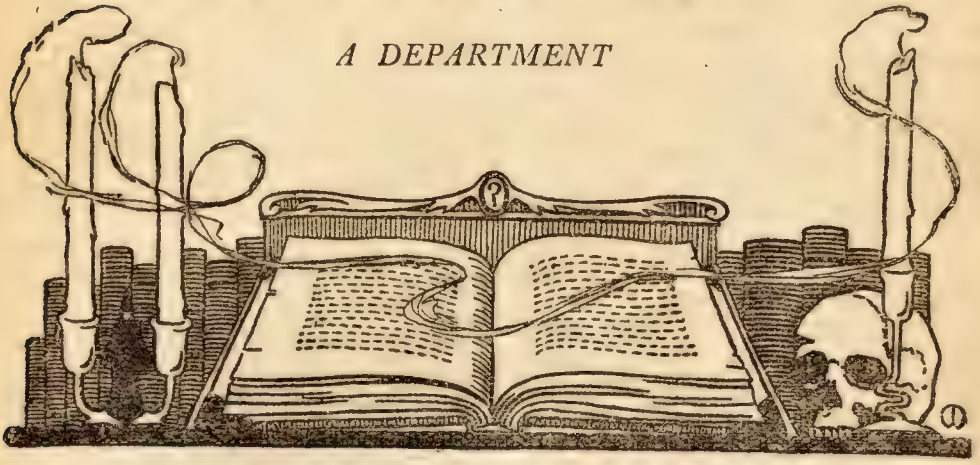
MANY have been the legends that arose in the past because of the appearance of that natural phenomenon, the mirage. Fairy cities and castles, fields, woods, lakes, appearing in the sky, were always ascribed to enchantment. Such manifestations are commonest on the sea and in the desert.

One of the strangest and most ancient of these appearances was that of the mysterious but beautiful island situated near the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, between the coasts of Ireland and Newfoundland, first observed by some Danish and Irish fishermen about the year 900. From that time to the fourteenth century it was seen frequently by Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and French fishermen and mariners. As it could never be approached, but always seemed to recede before a ship until it was lost to view, it was called the Enchanted Island, and was supposed by maritime folk of Western Europe to be the abode of departed spirits. The Irish called it the Country of Spirits, while the English called it variously Cockaigne of the Country of the Waves.

The French and the Spanish believed that there were two islands, Brasil and Asmunda, which they called collectively the Isles of the Ghosts. So thoroughly persuaded were the geographers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the existence of these islands, that they were shown on most of the maps of the Atlantic drawn in that period; and even in the eighteenth century, De l'Isle, the French geographer, located them on his maps, the one at 46 degrees, the other at 51 degrees north latitude.

In 1750, the sailors on the English ship, returning from Newfoundland, sighted, near latitude 50 degrees north, an island unknown to them, which appeared fair and blooming, covered with luxuriant woods and verdant fields, in which cattle were seen grazing; and nothing but a violent surge prevented the sailors, as they thought, from landing on that inviting soil. So convinced were they of its existence that upon their arrival at London ships were ordered out to confirm the discovery; but no island could ever be found.

The Most Mysterious Happening of My Life



A DEPARTMENT

Each month MYSTERY STORIES will print letters of five hundred words or less, telling of the strange experiences of our readers.

These experiences need not be of the occult type, but they must have a strong element of mystery, and their truthfulness must be vouched for by the authors.

For each letter published we shall send the writer five dollars.

A Deep-Sea Warning

By WARREN TRAYLOR DE WITT

DURING the war I was a radio operator on a West Coast cruiser doing convoy duty in the Atlantic. One dark and stormy mid-winter night in the middle of the ocean, I turned into my hammock just as eight bells, midnight, sounded. I had just completed my four-hour watch and was tired, as it is quite a strain when you have a fair part of the responsibility of ten or twelve ships loaded with doughboys, as well as your own vessel with a thousand men on it, on your shoulders.

The air was quiet except for two remote cable ships, and I tuned on the high wave lengths to copy the big German station, POZ, Nauen, on the outskirts of Berlin. They sent press in English almost continuously day and night, now and then stopping to send code messages to submarines at sea.

I loved to hear the hum of their set, rising and falling in power as it does. To me it always had a personality of its own—a truly ominous sound. Well, that night I copied a typewritten sheet of its press before getting back to the spark waves again to get a weather report from Poldhu, an English station, which was now becoming loud enough to copy. As I finished typing the report, I heard the cry outside:

"Relieve the wheel and lookouts."

My relief entered. I went below to my hammock, crawled in, and dropped into sound sleep.

I don't think I had slept more than thirty minutes when I woke up with sweat streaming down my face, although it certainly wasn't warm on that drafty main deck.

I had had a frightful dream. I had heard again that ominous rise and fall of power from the German station, and they were directing a submarine to our exact location. That U-boat was very close!

No wonder I woke up. So vivid was that nightmare that I dressed hurriedly, jumped out of my hammock, and laced up my life preserver, always worn in the war zone. As I did so, the signal bells all over the vessel went:

"Call to stations."

I raced up the ladder to the shack and found the chief himself on watch. It was a tense moment, I can tell you, wallowing along in the darkened, heaving seas as we were. One could hear the sound of weird footfalls of running men all over the ship as they rushed to stations.

"What is it?" I asked the chief.

"Submarine close by!" he said, his face tense. "She came up to charge her batteries." He quickly slid the headset off and handed them to me. "Listen to that, De Witt."

The noise, as I put them on, was very loud, sounding just like a coffee mill.

"Inductance," said the chief. "Believe me, we are close to that baby."

He took the phones again and motioned me to stand by in case anything developed.

But nothing did. We slid safely by with our convoy, and very thankful to do so, as you can imagine. After all, we weren't hunting submarines; it was our duty to get our soldiers safely to France.

Shortly the buzzing sounds in his phones grew fainter and died away. Everybody went back to his hammock, including yours truly. But I didn't sleep for quite a while. I had to puzzle a bit over that queer premonition, or warning—or call it what you will.

The Clicking Rosary

By LORNA RYAN

JUST prior to the war I spent four years in a Belgian convent—a huge, new building in a setting of lonely fields.

One night I was kept working in one of the lower class-rooms so late that there was not another soul stirring as I set out to traverse the silent cloisters and stairs that separated me from my dormitory.

When I reached the top and last floor, upon which I slept, I saw a small light burning at the far end of the gallery. On my left, a row of high windows looked out onto the courtyard—a well of darkness at that hour—and in the center of the long blank wall on my right was the dormitory door. Instead of entering at once, I paused to look at the light above the statue of a saint that stood against the left wall beyond the windows.

A small but brilliant glow lit up the gold-decked garments of the image and fell on the kneeling form of a nun. Her face, upturned and absorbed, was clear-cut against her veil and I could hear the soft monotone of her voice as she told her beads aloud. *"Je vous salue, Marie, plein de grâce,"* came the hollow chant, echoing through the empty darkness of the sleeping convent, and yet I could not make out who she was until I advanced a little closer. Then I recognized her as one of the sisters I particularly wanted to see.

When her prayer was ended she rose from her knees and I distinctly heard the brass crucifix fall from her fingers to the mosaic floor.

"Sister Ursula," I called in French, but there was no response save the clicking of the wooden rosary beads that swung from her waist as she crossed the gallery and disappeared through what seemed to be a door in the shadowed wall on the right.

I was petrified. There were no secret panels in the unbroken whiteness of that modern plaster. I was myself standing some distance past the entrance to the dormitory, *and there was no other doorway in the gallery.*

Sister Ursula was asleep in the bed beside my own *chambrette* in the domitory when I arrived there.

Whom had I seen and heard? Where did she go when she appeared to melt into the wall?

We Tell Our Readers

And now the holidays are over, and many long winter evenings are before us. There are winter sports, of course, and theaters, and other diversions of the season, but there will also be times when one can thoroughly enjoy reading. A lot of you will enjoy reading MYSTERY STORIES. We have some wonderful material on hand, with more constantly coming in, and we prophesy that you will find forthcoming issues eminently satisfying. The present number is an earnest of what we have in store for you.

How do you like THE MAN-WOLVES? There's no question about this two-part story's being unique in plot. Can you guess the dénouement? We couldn't, either. The yarn is pretty sure to enhance Mr. Leinster's already enviable reputation as a writer of mystery tales. Few can equal him.

Then there's our complete novelette, THE DUCHESSA'S EMERALDS, by *Mark Plum.* The leading character is "Plain John Smith," whose remarkable ability as a detective has endeared him to thousands who have read the other stories about him by this young author, who is rapidly forging to the front. John Smith has an unusual task set for him when he attempts to discover who murdered an international crook on an ocean liner. We have told you about Mark Plum in previous issues.

Thomas Topham is a writer who is highly thought of among readers of popular magazines. In THE MAGNIFICENT THIEF he gives us a story that will provide many a sly chuckle, even while it thrills you. It may interest you to know that in a certain prison in a Western State there is a pretty close counterpart of the lordly "Duke."

DEAD RECKONING was written by one of our best liked authors, *Richard Wilmer Rowan.* He seems to have a knack for inventing unusual situations and then turning them into stories filled to the brim with surprises. He will be remembered as the author of a popular series of spy stories which ran in these pages.

Bob du Soe is a new comer to MYSTERY STORIES, but he is well known for his work in other magazines. THE MIDNIGHT MAIL is a whale of an aviation story and it will keep you interested to the very end. Mr. du Soe is now in Northern Africa, where he is gathering material for future stories to appear in this publication.

We were a little worried at first as to how our women readers would like SNOOPY, so we handed it to one of our woman friends to get her reaction. Her verdict was "Immense!"

Erle Stanley Gardner and *Hamilton Craigie* are old favorites with magazine readers. Mr. Gardner hales from the West Coast and Mr. Craigie from the East, but there is the same vigor and action in their fiction. You'll like both ROUTINE STUFF and THE INCREDIBLE CASE OF CINCY SLIM.

REMOVALS, UNLIMITED, seems to us to have great possibilities. But even such an original organization as that of the alphabet trio could be circumvented, as *R. E. Alexander* has been careful to explain.

THE GENTLEMAN IN THE FUR CLOAK is one of the most dramatic of *Alvin F. Harlow's* FAMOUS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES. These fact tales are to appear in book form this coming year.

Princess Catherine Radziwill is on home ground when she writes of THE GHOST OF THE EMPRESS ELIZABETH in the second of the series, GHOSTLY VISITANTS TO ROYALTY, for she knew the Winter Palace unusually well during the reign of the late Czar.

Our Readers Tell Us

Every month we shall print on this page comments from our readers regarding MYSTERY STORIES.

For each letter which the Editor selects for publication the Publishers will send the writer Two Dollars.

DEAR EDITOR:

In all of my more than interested reading of MYSTERY STORIES I find not one impossible narrative. In the humdrum prosaic life nearly all of us lead, there is small vision of the great beyond. No conception is there of the all-devouring fires, nor yet of what they are feeding on to keep up the heat in the unseen space beneath us. We, with only our earthly sight, vision naught of the gods and angels we hear of as peopling that vast expanse above. We can only glimpse from afar the miracle of the sun and moon along with the countless stars; then when the clouds, freighted with rain, are sending out booming sounds of thunder and flashes of fire, we creep inside our shell-like earth-homes and some of us stop our ears and close our eyes against the awful din and flare.

THE COW CREEK MURDER is certainly a stirring story of life and death in the West. While I do not usually like Western stories, I do enjoy helping those wonderful authors hunt out the perpetrators of their many misdeeds. I enjoyed and read with breathless interest every word.

ONE NIGHT AT ST. MIHIEL is wonderful and beautiful beyond description. On the war medal awarded me in memory of my own dear son lost "Over There" are the service stripes recording three great battles; on one is St. Mihiel.

THAT HALLOWE'EN is intensely interesting all the way through. Too bad the ending should have been so unpleasant for all concerned!

THE STREET FROM HELL, even though an almost unconceivable horror all the way through, has a good ending. Bet those white ones will be out of it without their dope.

SNOWSLIDE certainly gives us an enlarged conception of the great out-of-door spaces in the Northland and ends as it ought to—well and interestingly.

ALL ABOARD is a wonderful mixture of people and their doings. If the ending which I impatiently await holds out along with the beginning, I shall be well paid for reading it.

In MYSTERY STORIES there seems to be something especial for each one of our folks. To me they are all new and interesting.

EMMA BRIGGS, Painesville, Ohio.

DEAR EDITOR:

What is more stimulating after a day of dull office routine than to sink comfortably into one's chair at home and become enmeshed in a copy of MYSTERY STORIES?

Life for most of us is a trite and monotonous round of insipid happenings that make us wish for something—anything—that will transcend the prosaic sameness of our lives and lift us into fanciful realms of thrills, dangers, and occult manifestations that are totally lacking at the office and at home.

MYSTERY STORIES greets us with a glamorous cover; each story title holds a hint of things we never knew; every story takes us on thrilling journeys into the unknown, the great land of make-believe, where all of us, no matter what our age, find the end of the rainbow.

Carefully chosen authors, well edited stories, print large enough to read without eye-strain, skilfully balanced tales, and an ample variety of subjects make MYSTERY STORIES the constant usurper of a place of honor on the polished table behind my big easy chair, within easy reach of my pipe and after dinner coffee cup.

GILSON WILLETS, San Francisco, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

Please do not ever eliminate your MOST MYSTERIOUS HAPPENING department. Through it we learn of things not created in the minds of authors for our entertainment. It puts us in touch with real people with peculiar experiences. Each month I read the articles and consider them all good. DO DREAMS COME TRUE? in the current issue and TELEPATHY OR WHAT? of earlier publication were both unusually interesting.

Like Mr. Church, I think DEAD MEN OF THE MOUNTAINS a little bizarre. I understand, of course, that an author should create an atmosphere which puts his reader in the mood to make the story plausible, but this particular story would be a strain on the credulity of even a child.

Give us some more stories in the vein of CLUES IN AVOIRDUPOIS. They keep one's imagination working. If one fails to foretell the outcome, an admiration for the author who can outwit one is the pleasant effect. If one solves the problem before the final denouement, one can pat himself on the back for being a bright fellow. Either of which whets one's appetite for more of the same.

Why aren't there more humorous stories? I am Irish enough to like a good laugh.

TERRY EUBANKS, Hereford, Texas.

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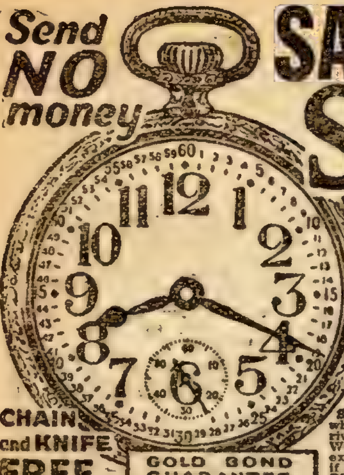

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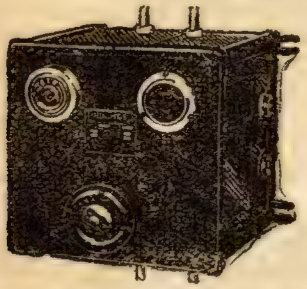

A Chicago inventor, C. F. Holmes, recently developed a new machine for charging batteries which promises amazing new fields of profit for operators. This new service station charger, according to the inventor, handles 50% to 70% more batteries than similar machines now on the market, yet effects a saving in electric current equal to 40% to 60% due to special transformer construction and other original features of design. Readers interested in this branch of service should write to C. F. Holmes, 5116 Ravenswood Ave., Chicago, Illinois, for a further description of his invention. Advertisement.

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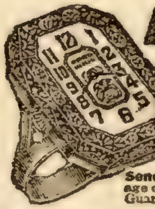

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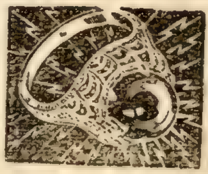

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Prominent physicians who have studied the effect of tobacco on the human system, over a period of years, tell us that thousands of men and women die prematurely because of the use of tobacco. As Dr. D. H. Kress states: "Tobacco is a deadly poison. It kills its user slowly. Some may live to old age in spite of its use, but none because of its use."

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If tobacco is a deadly poison, as medical scientists say, then common-sense tells you that once this poison is eliminated from your system you will be healthier and stronger, and in better shape mentally and physically. No question about it! Today is the time to stop this injurious habit.

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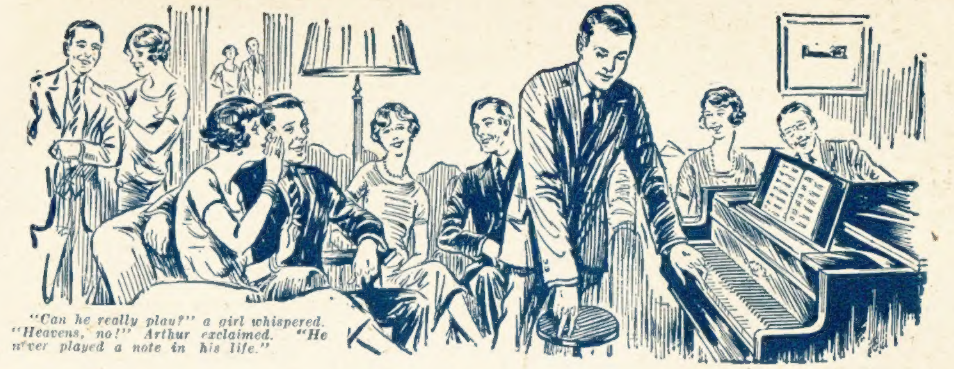

"Can he really play?" a girl whispered. "Heavens, no!" Arthur exclaimed. "He never played a note in his life."

They Laughed When I Sat Down At the Piano But When I Started to Play!—

ARTHUR had just played "The Rosary." The room rang with applause. Then to the amazement of all my friends, I strode confidently over to the piano and sat down.

"Jack is up to his old tricks," somebody chuckled. The crowd laughed. They were all certain that I couldn't play a single note.

"Can he really play?" I heard a girl whisper to Arthur.

"Heavens, no," Arthur exclaimed. "He never played a note in all his life. . . ."

I decided to make the most of the situation. With mock dignity I drew out a silk handkerchief and lightly dusted off the keys. Then I rose and gave the revolving piano stool a quarter of a turn. The crowd laughed merrily. Then I started to play.

Instantly a tense silence fell on the guests. I played the first few bars of Liszt's immortal Liebestraüm. I heard gasps of amazement. My friends sat breathless—spellbound! I played on.

A Complete Triumph!

As the last notes of the Liebestraüm died away, the room resounded with a sudden roar of applause. I found myself surrounded by excited faces. Everybody was exclaiming with delight — plying me with rapid questions . . . "Jack! Why didn't you tell us you could play like that?" . . . "Where *did* you learn?"—"Who *was* your teacher?"

"I have never even *seen* my teacher," I replied. "And just a short while ago I could not play a note."

"Quit your kidding," laughed Arthur, himself an accomplished pianist. "You've been studying for years. I can tell."

"I have been studying only a short while," I insisted. "I kept it a secret so that I could surprise you folks."

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